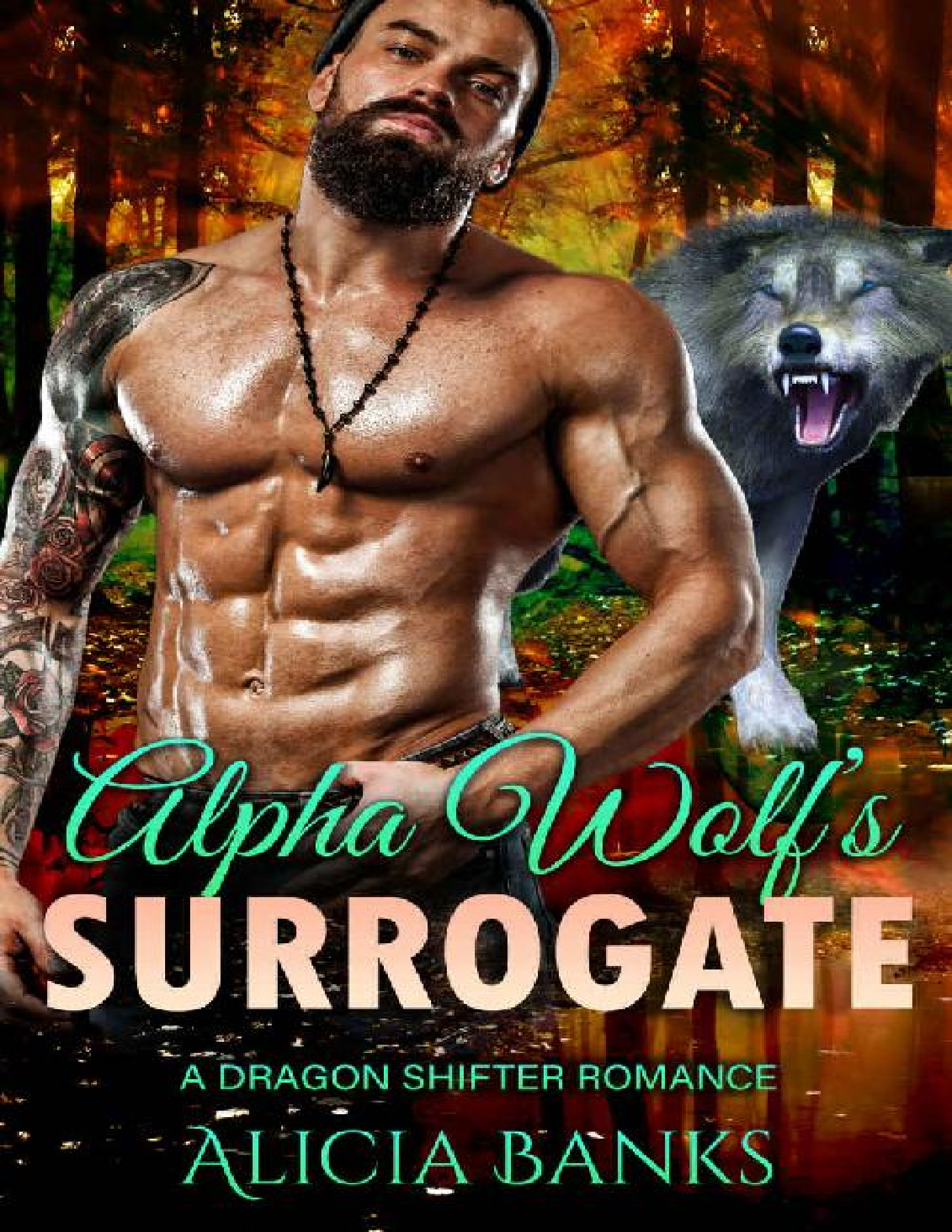
Alpha Wolf's
SURROGATE
A DRAGON SHIFTER ROMANCE
ALICIA BANKS

# Alpha Wolf's Surrogate

*A WOLF SHIFTER ROMANCE (GRUMPY AND BROKEN SHIFTERS SERIES BOOK 2)*

Alicia Banks

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ALPHA WOLF'S SURROAGATE: A WOLF SHIFTER ROMANCE

# Alpha Wolf's Surrogate

BLURB

**After years of trying, the Alpha King must have an heir—no matter what it took. He didn't have emotions. All he knew was to fight battles and to expand his boundary. So kidnaping Moonlit was no big deal for him…**

**Moonlit: The Beautiful Outsider**

As an outsider in the Royal clan, all I wanted to do was belong.
I was willing to do anything to prove myself and my worth.
A tournament with a tempting prize reeled me in.

This was my chance and I won.

Before I celebrate my happiness, I learned that I was stabbed in the back.

I didn't win but put my life in jeopardy.
He wanted me for something else, *to be the Royal surrogate!*
The traditional way an heir would be brought about made me blush.
Cloud wouldn't take no for an answer, like I could say it anyway.
When he was close, the Alpha King made my body scream with desire.
I tried not to fall for the king, my enemy, but I didn't know how to stop.

**Cloud: The Alpha King**

My mate was fated to me, the title of king was given to me at a young age.
I had everything and… I should be happy.
The one thing I didn't have though, was the one thing I needed, *an heir.*

I had to have one to secure my clan's future.
I needed a strong woman to carry my heir, one that I could keep close.

The tournament brought out the best the clan had to offer, Moonlit winning it all.
She had my attention, and soon after, she had my love.
My clan could never accept her or the truth.
My wolf doesn't care who she is or where she came from.
My inner beast just wants her.
I had to make her mine and I would go against anyone to have her.
I can give her love, make her my mate, marry her, but she wants more than that.

**Will the Alpha King be able to save his love from those in his clan who fear the change she brings? What will happen when he gets to know her real intentions? Will Moonlit be able to kill the Royal King when he has her heart?**

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# Chapter 1

Moonlit

Moonlit and Oleander sat on a cliff overlooking the village. It was one of the biggest in all the clans, thousands lived within its walls, thousands more lived on the other side of it. It was in a nice little valley, so deep in the woods and with the help of the little magic, the Royal clan hid from humans that could never know about them.

The village was currently filling up to the brim. Moonlit and Oleander had gone to their high vantage point, so that they could see the festivities that they both knew they would have no chance of actually participating in it. They were out-wallers, and it was just a way of saying their family line wasn't noble enough to live inside of the gates. The out-wallers were fodder for the wars. They didn't matter and were not protected by the king.

Something was happening inside the walls. Moonlit could see over from her vantage point. She saw streams of people coming in. Some people had equipment, tents that were set up just inside the walls. Others brought exotic animals from all corners of the world and then there was a string of fighters.

The thing that caught Moonlit’s eye the most was that most of the fighters were women. That was an unusual sight, considering that the Alpha’s Royal Army was in motion, fighting skirmishes with one clan or another. Moonlit was used to seeing men but seeing so many women gathered together to obviously fight had her wondering what was going on.

She finally pulled her eyes away from the sight and looked at her friend Oleander. Oleander was looking just as intently, her brown eyes didn't even notice Moonlit staring, until she asked her what she

thought was going on. Her friend had been so engrossed in the scene in front of her that she jumped a little bit, startled when Moonlit broke the silence.

“Can you believe this?”

“What do you think they're doing down there?” Moonlit asked with apprehension. For one reason or another she was nervous. Or maybe it was excitement.

Even though Moonlit knew that she wouldn’t be able to get inside the walls, wouldn’t be welcome there, and she wouldn’t be able to participate in whatever they were doing, she still had a desire to be inside the walls. There was safety there, something that was hard to find on the rolling space around the castle and village. Her life was not secure, but the lives of the Royals felt far more secure than anything she had ever experienced in her life. Moonlit imagined that everybody on the outside felt that way, looking in and wishing that they could be there.

“They're having some kind of tournament. The shopkeepers are talking about it, but they don’t seem to know much,” Oleander responded in a low voice, like she was telling a secret.

Moonlit sat up, the drop to the ground was at least twenty feet. She liked it up there. She liked not only the view but the feeling of being so precariously on the edge of life and death. She wondered always for a brief moment, one brief morbid moment, what it would be like to just lean forward. It was hard to live life in the shadow of others. Moonlit knew that she got one life, but instead of living it to the fullest, she was mitigated and lessened, minimized because of the blood running through her veins. It didn't seem fair, and it never seemed fair and that was why she always had that moment when she was up there.

She stood taller, letting the moment pass and deciding that it was time to go. Moonlit didn't want to look anymore. She wanted to know what was going on and there weren’t enough answers from there.

“Are those female fighters? Do you think the tournament is for women?” Moonlit wondered out loud.

“Maybe, but it's not like they would let you compete. I don't know why you even think that we would ever be invited, Moonlit. You need to get your head out of the clouds.”

Moonlit refused to admit that she wasn't thinking straight. It just felt like an injustice and even though nobody else seemed to mind the way of things, she could not bring herself to feel nothing about it. Why was she less, just because of who her parents were and their parents before them? Greatness could come out of anybody. That's what Moonlit had always thought, but that would get her thrown into a dungeon if she said it too loud or in front of the wrong person.

“I am not going to start anything, I just want to know what's going on,” Moonlit said.

Moonlit didn't understand how Oleander could be so nonchalant about it. Most of the people that lived outside the outer walls, seemed to have accepted their fate and place in the world. Moonlit had a harder time coming to grips with it. She didn’t feel like she belonged anywhere. Moonlit felt like she was exactly where she was supposed to be when she was on the cliff, disconnected and involved, but not included.

“I don't see why we couldn't fight in the tournament. If they think we are so much less than them, then they should let us fight.” Moonlit walked purposefully toward the town they had been watching. She knew that unless she had an invite from someone inside the wall, she would never get in there. Moonlit needed to focus on that first, getting inside the walls. It meant that she needed information. There was a market that set up every morning and ran until it got hot outside. She was going to go there, dragging her friend along, until they found someone having the right conversation.

Oleander just shook her head, like Moonlit had lost her mind again. “You really should let this go. I don't know why you get so

focused on these things...”

“While you may be happy with your lot in life, you have a wonderful husband and daughters, I don’t feel the same way, Oleander. You have a life out here. I am just waiting for my life to begin.”

Oleander scoffed. “You’ve had many suitors, Moonlit. You’re the one who turns them all away,” Oleander gently reminded Moonlit.

Moonlit nodded in agreement, but that was as far as it was going to go. She had many suitors, but none of them sparked anything inside of her. Moonlit wasn't going to wait for just anyone. She knew that she had a destiny and there was a man attached to that destiny. Moonlit didn't know who that man was or where she would find him, but her eyes looked back and sighed because they were too far away to see anymore. It felt like her fate was there, inside the walls. The only problem with the whole thing was that Moonlit couldn’t go there.

# Chapter 2

Moonlit

The two women got down to the main road in and out, but they abruptly stopped, watching the soldiers march by in their finest gear. The metal armor was thin and light to help them move faster, as well as molded to their body as they changed into their true form. It made a soft tinkling sound as they passed, so different from the fierce fighters who were inside of them.

“There he is,” Oleander turned to Moonlit and said quietly, like she was afraid that they would hear her. Moonlit wasn't as worried about it. She had instead envisioned herself in the line, only she did not want to fight for the king, she wanted to fight against him. King Cloud was like all the rest of the royalty that lived behind the walls. He did not even think that they were worth a look, not even turning his head even slightly to see them as he passed.

Oleander stood there in awe; Moonlit stood there with a slow, seething rage. She knew what her friend went on about, she wasn’t blind. The king was desired by most of the women Moonlit knew. He was taller, bigger, and sexier than all the rest of the soldiers. Cloud stood tall with dark brown hair, a chiseled body, and a fierce wolf that made all the girls swoon. Moonlit didn’t feel that strong about it. She wasn’t going to swoon surely. She did notice though, even if she didn’t want to.

Right before the procession turned the corner, Cloud turned and looked at her. The king of their clan looked at her. Moonlit’s face turned red. She was sure that he had read her mind or heard her thoughts. His eyes clashed with hers, his face expressionless but handsome. He looked like a god, everybody thought so, and that was one thing that Moonlit agreed with most people on, even if she

would never admit it. There had never been an Alpha like Cloud before, and his sheer size was a testament to that fact.

Neither woman said a word for several moments. Moonlit was getting her breath back and Oleander was still watching the rows of men. Oleander seemed very interested in them. “I thought you said that you were happily married?” Moonlit snarked.

“Well, there is happily married and then there is blind. Look at all of these men. Sometimes I think that there is something to the blood issues. I mean, look at them. They look like gods. No out-waller man looks like that,” Oleander relented. She was married to an out-waller man.

Moonlit tried to ignore her friend. She didn't want to think about them like that. They were the same as her, no better, no worse. That was her biggest issue with all of it, the idea that some were better than others, just because of where they came from. She figured she would feel differently if she was on the other side of the wall, if she was on the inside. That wasn't the case though. She wasn't inside the wall, she was outside. She would always feel less, and the anger that she felt toward everyone inside seethed inside of her unchecked, had for years. Moonlit knew that she wasn’t the only one, even if it felt like it sometimes.

Oleander finally pulled her eyes away from the eye candy of the troops heading home. They walked the road on the side to give the men a wide berth, Moonlit thinking about the walls, obsessing over there. It was all she did sometimes.

“Let’s get a move on, Moonlit. If you want to know what is going on, we need to get there before it is too busy and the shops won’t be talking,” Oleander prompted Moonlit. She found herself slacking, trying to get another look of the king.

They kept walking, turning in the opposite direction of the soldiers. They weren’t going inside the walls after all. Moonlit looked back once, feeling eyes on her, the dark eyes of the Alpha looking at

her. The man was long gone, so why did she still feel his presence? It wasn't like the king was common. He was royalty and that meant that he was above them all. Moonlit swallowed the bitterness that she felt about it all, ignoring the tingling feeling the king created.

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The two women made it to the market, and it wasn't long before they figured out what was going on. The whole village, inside and outside of the walls, were trying their best to be a part of the celebration. The out-wallers were making things to sell on the way in, knowing that there was a good chance they would get to sell some of their wares to the royalty as they were going into the walled city. Moonlit wished that she had an excuse to go to the city, but she didn't know what kind of excuse she could use. She had nothing to sell.

After asking and listening, they found out what they had seen from the cliffs. There was to be a women's-only tournament for fighting. Since women weren't really praised all that much for anything beyond having children, Moonlit was surprised by the tournament. It didn't make sense to her. It had to be something other than what it was being called. She knew that there was no way that the king was worried about women fighting. So, what was the point of it all?

She wanted to get to the bottom of the why, though no one seemed to care what was going on, besides the pretty exterior. It felt off and Moonlit knew that it likely meant it was off in some way. She was going to figure out what.

Oleander found her husband in the crowd, and they set off together, while Moonlit found out a bit more, but not at all what she was trying to find out the whole time. There was no reason given for the tournament, just that the winner would get an exclusive home on the hills far above the city. It was where all of the richest and Royalist people went. Moonlit couldn't imagine a life like that, in a house so lavish and so remote. It would be a dream come true. Of course, the

last thing she heard was just about right. She wasn't going to be allowed in the walls, let alone to play in the tournament. It was for royalty only, which wasn't that hard to imagine. Nothing was ever done for the out-wallers.

Pushing away her aggravation, Moonlit went back home and hit on the form of a man she'd made out of wood. It hurt to hit it, which made her feel better, because Moonlit was so upset. She was sick of being on the outside looking in. Life in the walls had to be better than anything that could happen to her outside of them.

She sighed, looking up at the impenetrable walls that loomed overhead twenty feet into the air, almost blocking out the sun from her angle. Moonlit couldn't help but hate the people in the walls, so safe and free. She hated all of them. She hated being different and wished that there was some way to change her station in life. Moonlit doubted that there was, but her mind kept going to the tournament. And what life would be like inside the walls…

# Chapter 3

Cloud

“Where are you running off to,” Star Fire wanted to know. Cloud looked to his father’s old second-in-command and made a face. He wanted to get away from everybody. They were crawling around all over. The tournament had brought in people from all around, something that Cloud was happy with because it suited his purpose, but that did not mean that he wanted to deal with the extra thousands that were suddenly descending upon his city. Cloud should have been happy, but all he wanted to do was hide.

“Trying to get away from all these damn people. I will probably go to the labs. At least it's underground and I won't have to hear all the festivities,” Cloud grumbled.

“You're supposed to want them. You are the one who suggested it and got it started. Are you not happy with the results? It is even more people than we thought would show up. I thought you’d be pleased,” Star Fire said blandly. Cloud knew that the man was working for his father and Battle Star’s angles, not his.

Cloud agreed with the latter. It was far more people than he thought was needed, but he didn't have much choice. There was no way that he could really talk about why he was doing it, so the tournament had been the best way. Now though with everyone swarming his small village, he wondered if that was the right course of action. At the moment, it certainly didn't feel like it.

Star Fire had asked him why they were doing the tournament in the beginning; he didn't like being left in the dark, but Cloud never said it out loud. He worried what would happen if people knew the truth and then he told himself that the truth didn't matter, as long as

he found the woman he was looking for. If Star Fire knew, he'd just run back to his dad and tell him everything. Cloud couldn't have that.

He wanted to get out of the body armor because he was sick of hearing the sound of himself walk. Cloud went to his own room and found his mate Mia lying down. She likely wasn't feeling good. She had a delicate continence, but she was looking out the window with interest.

"There are so many people," she exclaimed, excited. Cloud didn't feel the least bit of excitement. It was a shame really that everybody was there. He would have wanted nothing more than his privacy. While bringing more people in had been Mia's idea, it still didn't sit well with him. Nothing in their current plan did.

He gave her a kiss on the cheek and asked her how she was feeling.

"I'm just tired today," she said with a weak voice. He asked her if she needed anything, and Mia disagreed. "No, I've just been watching from the window. I can't believe how many people showed up for the tournament. That was a great idea."

"It's a good thing too. I worry that this is the wrong thing to do," Cloud explained.

He was sitting next to her on the bed, and she touched his hand softly. "It's the only thing we can do, and you know it. Unless you want to get another mate." She said the words so quietly that he could barely hear them. Cloud knew that the fact that he didn't was why they had to do it. It just wasn't working between them for some reason.

Mia didn't feel that it was on both of them. She took all the blame on herself and focused on it far more than Cloud did. He knew that he needed to produce an heir. Leaders were very aware of it, but after three years of being mated, it still hadn't happened. Mia had a hard time dealing with it and he had to wonder if it had something to

do with it, but at the same time he knew that there was nothing to be done. Mia had been chosen for him for one reason or another. Cloud had to believe that it was the right decision, even if nothing was going the way it was supposed to. He still had to have faith in traditions.

It worried him though, that maybe the reason Mia hadn’t gotten pregnant yet was because she wasn't supposed to. Maybe his blood wasn't supposed to carry on, maybe someone else was meant to take up the position. Cloud didn't want to believe that. He wanted to believe that his son and his son’s sons would rule the clan. That wasn't going to happen though, if he didn't have an heir. For whatever reason, it just wasn't happening for the two of them. Even while she was the one who had suggested it, it still didn't feel one hundred precent right what they were attempting to do.

Mia asked him the question that she had asked so many times before. “Do you think it's finally time?”

Cloud shrugged. “I don't know if it is or not, Mia, but we are certainly giving it our best damn shot.”

She smiled in agreement, making him warm inside. He wished that things were different, that he was a different husband, and he could give her emotionally what he could give her physically. Even with that thought in his mind, when she touched his hand and wanted to get closer, Cloud patted it and stood up. He had a lot on his mind and the thought that he could not produce an heir in the traditional manner just made things worse. Cloud didn’t blame Mia, just the fates that brought them together and made it impossible.

# Chapter 4

Moonlit

“It's not fair! You have been practicing while I've been away!” Jesse accused with a grin on his face. Moonlit agreed but didn’t truthfully tell him that she had been practicing as much as humanly possible. It wasn't just the tournament that she had only recently found out about for the weekend but the growing discontent that Moonlit found within herself. Training being physical was practically the only thing that made her feel like she wasn't going to immediately come out of her skin.

She helped Jesse off the ground, ignoring the dirty look on his face and explaining that she had been practicing a little bit. “Not much though, I promise I haven't been practicing that much.”

He didn't believe her, saying that there was no way she had gotten so good in the time he’d been away. Jesse had been away for practically a month. In that time, she had spent most of it daydreaming about a life that could never be, practicing her fighting skills, thinking that one day soon she would need it. One day soon. She was getting stronger to prepare herself for the fight that she was sure was coming.

Jesse smiled. “You're getting damn good, Moonlit. It's a shame you can't try your hand in the tournament. I think you would really have a shot. I've seen a lot of the competition, and I think you would take it.”

“You don’t have to say things like that, Jesse,” Moonlit said, embarrassed.

“I’m just being honest.”

It made Moonlit feel better to hear such things. At the same time it was sort of bittersweet because no matter how badly she wanted to or how good she knew it would be, it wouldn't matter. She would always be an out-waller.

“It doesn't matter anyway. Who wants to go live up on the hill?” Moonlit wondered.

Jesse chuckled. “Every damn one of us, that’s who.”

She had to agree. She knew that she wasn't the only one who wished for things she couldn't have. She turned to Jesse and took in his straw-blonde hair and skinny physique. He was someone who came from the inside of the wall. He slummed it with her, though Moonlit wasn't really sure why. She had a feeling that he had a crush on her, but it would never happen. People that lived inside of the wall did not converse, especially not in such an intimate matter like love. Royalty could slum with the likes of people like Moonlit, but it could never be anything serious. It wasn't against the rules, it was just frowned upon, and neither in the relationship would be happy with the outcome. One would be ostracized for the first time in their lives, and the other would be openly hated and scorned.

Jesse and Moonlit weren't romantic, they were just really good friends. Moonlit had helped him years ago with a private matter he needed taken care of. He had needed identification documents for one of his girlfriends that wasn’t from the right side of the wall. Moonlit had facilitated the transaction. She knew people and was able to get anything done that was needed. It was only a pure coincidence that the two of them had even met. She valued her friendship with Jesse, but sometimes it was hard for him to understand certain things. He would never understand what it was like to be an out-waller because he had always been on the inside.

“I just wished I could at least have a chance. I know that I probably wouldn't win, but to not even have a chance is hard to take sometimes,” Moonlit continued to lament.

“You'll get your chance, Moonlit, mark my words. I have a good feeling about it,” Jesse encouraged. He was always so full of optimism, and Moonlit was convinced that it was merely because life inside of the walls was just that great. He had no reason to think that life wasn’t going to go his way. She envied his optimism, especially when her thoughts were so dark.

Every time he tried to make her feel better, she liked to believe that he knew something that she didn't. He knew of her success, instead of a failure. That's what she wanted to think anyway. It was the only thing that made sense, considering how much time and energy was put into it.

“I hope you're right, Jesse. I don't think you are. I don't think that my kind are ever going to get a break, but I can always hope, can’t I?” Moonlit commented.

“You know, Moonlit, there are ways to get inside the walls,” Jesse said.

Moonlit shook her head and couldn't look at Jesse. It was a pity that she didn’t see him that way. Jesse was a good guy. She didn’t want to get in the walls as his mistress, trespassing in a way. She wanted to be there because of her standing, not because of a man. She wanted to deserve to be there. At the same time, she hated everyone in it. It was always mixed emotions when it came to Moonlit’s feelings about it all.

Jesse was again suggesting they get together. It wasn’t the first time for sure. It wasn't that she didn't like Jesse, but she didn't want to be with him romantically. He had been quite clear that he was open to it, but she was not. She just wanted to be friends with him, knowing that anything romantic would just make it more complicated. Jesse had even offered to hire her as their live-in housekeeper, but even though he denied it, Moonlit knew that there would be more that he would want.

He probably wouldn’t try to force her, but he would push the issue until it became awkward and they would no longer be friends. Moonlit had found his friendship to be worth more, and she wasn't attracted to people who looked like Jesse. She was more attracted to large, capable men. A certain person came to mind, a very specific person, and her cheeks got red thinking about it. Someone like Cloud on the other hand, he turned her head, even if she hated him and everything that his people stood for.

She checked the time, cursing underneath her breath, and gave Jesse a kiss on the cheek before she took off.

“Where are you going?” Jesse hollered to her.

Moonlit stopped for a minute and turned back around to her old friend. “I just have a few things to take care of back by the market. I will see you tomorrow, okay?”

Jesse agreed, waving goodbye, and Moonlit wished that she was able to tell him where she was going. He was a good old friend, but he was still somebody who lived inside the walls, and she could never forget that.

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Moonlit was late and she raced to a secret meeting that was half a mile from the market. She had to dash and was out of breath when she got inside. Moonlit was suddenly among many familiar faces, many people watching her as she sat down in the back. It had already started. Moonlit hated to miss the beginning and people noticed her late arrival.

“We cannot live like this any longer. How many of you are tired of living in the shadow of the wall? How many of you are tired of having no say in laws that govern us? How many of you are ready to stand and fight?!”

The speaker was not from around there. He was outside of the Dakotas, which meant that he had traveled a long way to get there. It was sad when Moonlit thought about it, the fact that the out-wallers needed an outsider to rally them, but that's exactly what was happening. She couldn't help but cheer him on as he spoke, sick of living in the shadows of others. Moonlit wanted a life; she wanted her own life and knew that the only way it was going to happen was if they fought for it. It had already been proven that fairness and equality were never going to happen under the current king and system.

It wasn't the first meeting that she had gone to, but it was the first one that inspired her to push the boundaries of what was supposed to be. She started thinking about the tournament again, wondering if there was a way for her to get in. Moonlit needed to find one. She was meant to go to that tournament. She was meant to show everyone what she was capable of. She was meant to be something more than an out-waller.

# Chapter 5

Cloud

He heard a commotion at the side gate to the castle and Cloud immediately went to see what was going on. It was the day before the tournament and there were lots of people who came to see what was going on, but very few had actually come to participate. He'd seen the choices so far, and Cloud wasn't too confident.

"Please, just let me talk to someone that isn't you!" He heard the shouting again, a woman's voice carrying over all the rest. It was loud in the castle, people everywhere, but many had come to a stop, listening to the woman. No one could see her, Cloud couldn't, but he knew that it was an out-waller. No one from inside the castle walls would bring that much attention to themselves, especially not when he was in the hall.

He went to the noise and saw the same dark-haired beauty that he'd seen a few days before on the road. She had been with another woman, watching the soldiers, inducing him to look her way, but she had not been filled with awe. The raven-haired woman had looked at him like she despised him, not looking down but meeting his gaze. There had been a moment between them, but it had faded, and Cloud figured that he would never see her again. Seeing her there at the door, he wondered if there was more to her being there than met the eye.

"Who are you and what are you doing here, breaking the peace for all?" Cloud asked, his voice far rougher than he'd wanted it to be. It was always so no-nonsense sounding, but now it was practically bit out and he saw her flinch.

“I want to talk to someone about the tournament,” she said, unsure of herself as she leveled her gaze at him.

“What’s your name?” Cloud inquired, more annoyed than upset. Moonlit didn’t seem to care what her disturbance had caused.

“It doesn’t matter my name. I want to compete in the tournament like everyone else,” she stated, looking around as whispers went through the crowd that was ever-growing. Cloud hadn’t expected that as an answer, but she had her head held high now. No one talked to him that way, he was a fierce Alpha. He ran everything and no one would dare say such things to his face or within earshot.

The more people that saw the exchange, the more Cloud was pressured to respond. He knew that he had to rule with an iron-fist, even if he didn’t want to. While he was curious of the woman who dared so much, he also knew that there was no way that he could seem to care one way or another. It was clear what was really going on. An out-waller wanted in the tournament. He hadn’t even considered it, wouldn’t have before, but when he saw the sign-up for the tournament, it worried him. No one there was suitable to win.

Maybe…

“What would you do in a tournament for Royal women at arms? You have no training, no experience. How could you ever think that you would be a match for anyone in these walls, many who have trained since they were young?” Cloud asked, sounding condescending to his own ears. There was laughter throughout the crowd, happy to hear that she had been put in her place. Cloud wasn’t worried about what they thought. He was watching the anger rise on her face, then get swallowed down.

“I would win the tournament. That’s what I would do, win,” Moonlit said, cocky as ever. Her confidence made him smile and he wanted nothing more than to let her play, but he had to do more. He had to put a caveat into it, or he would have every out-waller trying to get in.

Cloud wasn't sure if he wanted that, but he knew that he wanted the one in front of him to be there.

"You want in the tournament, then you are going to have to put something on the line for it."

Moonlit looked confused and Cloud was still trying to figure out what it was that he meant. This was all coming apart. Everyone's eyes on him made him say what he said next. Moonlit inquired what it was she had to put on the line, and he smiled. "Your life will be mine if you lose."

There was a silence that ran through the crowd of people. Cloud couldn't hear what they were saying, but he knew that it was curiosity as to why he was even talking to her, let alone giving her a chance. They didn't know what Cloud knew though.

"Be more specific," Moonlit said slowly.

"You would come to live with me and do my bidding," Cloud said blandly. He didn't get into what that meant, figuring that her imagination would do a better job of coming up with ideas than he would. Why he said it, Cloud didn't know. It sounded right at the time, but he was shocked that he'd said it nonetheless.

"Fine, you have a deal. I am going to win though. An out-waller is going to live up there in the hills, looking down on the king."

Gasps went out all around Cloud. The guards stopped the fiery woman who was trying to leave. He could have her head for that, hell, even her being there was enough, but instead, he told them to let her pass.

"What name shall I put down for the tournament?" Cloud asked.

"Moonlit."

"Moonlit what?" Cloud inquired.

“Does it matter? I’m just an out-waller. I have no chance.”

Cloud felt himself smiling, unable to stop the gesture. It wasn’t the reaction that everyone had expected, nor him for that matter. If anyone else had talked to him like that, they wouldn’t be living. It was just that simple. Moonlit though, she was different.

However it all turned out, he was going to be seeing a lot more of her. Cloud didn’t care what happened in the tournament. Her fate was sealed with him either way.

# Chapter 6

Moonlit

Moonlit was shaking as she walked away from the castle, through the wall that she had bribed and scaled a part of to get over. She was tired but knew that the shaking wasn't from the physical exertion to get over the wall and get to the castle without being seen. Her clothes were ragged, her hair wasn't shiny, her skin not as clean. Everything about her had screamed that she was an out-waller, so she had to run several times to get to the side entrance unseen. That didn't make her heart race though. It was the few moments in front of Cloud that had done it.

There had been no real plan when Moonlit had decided on her crazy thoughts. It was so insane that she hadn't even told her best friend Oleander about it. Moonlit had been afraid that she would try to have her stopped for her own protection. Moonlit now was so glad that she had done it. She was in the tournament!

Crap.

She was in the tournament. The thought sunk into her head and made it hurt. It was only a day away, not even a full day. Moonlit looked up at the sky, saw the position of the sun, and knew that it was on the wrong side of noon. She had to practice. She needed to find Jesse and get some tips, not just on fighting, but how to act. Moonlit was going to be a fish out of water, and she wanted to give them no reason to make fun of her. She wanted to blend in with people she knew it would be impossible to be like.

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Jesse hadn't been sure of her plan, but when he heard that she was going to be in the tournament, something changed. He was prepared to help her, eager to change her into the perfect Royal shifter. Moonlit didn't want to feel the pressure of being different, but Jesse knew every way that she was. He pointed it out and started with her taking a bath.

Moonlit didn't take baths. She took washes in the stream like everyone else. Jesse left, coming back with a washtub for clothes and some oils to put in the tub. She was horrified that she needed to do it, worse when he suggested that he help.

"I can bathe myself, Jesse."

She was behind a curtain in her living room, Jesse was banished to the hall. The water had been brought, heated, poured, and the room smelled of flowers that were in a small sachet.

"I was just offering to help. I know that your hair is long."

Moonlit scoffed and unraveled the braid that she kept partially pinned. Her hair was long, to her knees when it was down, but it was never down. Jesse had never seen it down all the way, just braided. Moonlit knew that he had a crush on her, but she wasn't going to pretend that it was ever going to happen. The two of them weren't right for each other and him being in there would only make his crush worse.

"Are you sure you don't need help?"

"No!" she hollered back, annoyed that he was still asking. She was already having a mini heart attack from it all. Moonlit had put it all on the line. How was she supposed to cope?

She washed her hair and dunked under for a moment to rinse the soap out. When she came back up, there was a castle guard a few feet from the tub, able to see everything and she shrieked, hiding her body the best that she could.

“What are you doing in here?!” Moonlit yelled.

“I am supposed to bring this to you.”

It was a box and Moonlit had to move one arm to grab it. She flashed the guard again and groaned.

“What is this?” she asked, turning it over in her hand.

“It’s to make you feel like less of an outsider tomorrow.” The guard barely looked at her. He turned and walked away, his duty concluded. She’d felt his eyes on her, but only for a respectable moment. He’d readjusted soon after figuring out what was going on.

The water sloshed in the tub as she leaned back. It was small and she was about as clean as she was going to get. Moonlit was trying her best not to let nerves get to her, but the box in her hand, simple with no embellishments, had to have come from one man. The words were not from the guard, they were from Cloud. How sweet to acknowledge how she would feel.

Moonlit expected many things, a servant outfit or something, but it was instead some of the most beautiful light armor that she’d ever seen. Moonlit had never owned or wore anything as nice as that. She was still staring at it, naked, when Jesse moved the curtain, asking what that was about. He stopped, gawked, and Moonlit finally told him to turn around. The two was forgotten, but she knew now to cover up. Jesse was never going to move on if Moonlit wasn’t firm with him. Either way, it worked out; they wouldn’t have much time to spend together going forward. She hoped that they could still be friends in some way.

“Who is that from? Is that armor?”

Moonlit looked for a note in the box, something to tell her who it was from so that she would know for sure, but she had a pretty good idea.

“I think it’s from the king.”

He looked shocked, then suspicious. “What?”

Moonlit shrugged. “I think so. It could be from anyone. I don’t know. Either way, at least I have something to wear. You can check that off your list.”

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Jesse was fighting a little harder when it came time for the two of them to practice. He didn't hold back like he usually did, and Moonlit got knocked down several times. She hoped that it wasn't a precursor for what was to come. While she wanted to believe that everything was going to be fine and she was going to win the tournament because she had to, it was then and only then that she started to wonder what would happen if she didn't. Cloud had not said so. She had no idea of his plans for her if she lost. Would he even want her around? Moonlit couldn't imagine him wasting much time on someone like her, but the idea of it still made her tremble inside.

Just like Jesse, Moonlit fought harder than usual and when she finally bested Jesse, he shifted into his wolf form, something he rarely did when they were practicing, and she stopped fully, waiting for him to change back so that she could ask him why. He rarely shifted.

“What did you do that for?”

“Because in the tournament everybody is going to be able to do that.”

Moonlit swallowed hard. “I didn't know that.”

“Yes, they all do it too. It helps to liven it up, whatever works best for you.”

“What if I'm not good enough for the competition?” she asked with the barest voice possible. He could barely hear her words, she said them so low. It was all she could think about, not being enough.

Jesse moved to put his arm around her and for once, it wasn't in a sexual nature. It was of a friendly nature and that was exactly what Moonlit needed. She needed to hear it, especially when he told her that everything was going to be okay. Moonlit didn't believe him; she didn't even think that he believed it, but just saying it was enough. She started to feel better, even if it was a complete lie.

For the next couple of hours, Moonlit used her shifter form to fight Jesse. He was far better than her at first because she never practiced that way, not in her true form. She was better when she left him, but Moonlit was still worried about the tournament. Moonlit looked at the outfit that Cloud had sent her, wondering why he sent it at all. One way or another, he was about to be in her life. Moonlit wasn't sure how she felt about it, but she knew that the attraction she felt for him was still there. Moonlit could ignore it all she wanted, but Cloud was already on her mind more than she would have liked.

# Chapter 7

Cloud

Cloud got a lot of looks as he walked through the village. He knew what they were talking about. He acted out of his nature and people wanted to know why. If Cloud was honest with himself, he wanted to know as well. He didn't act that way usually, didn't care who she was. Moonlit was an out-waller and beneath him. If Moonlit had any good breeding, she would be inside the walls. That should have told him all he needed to know. Cloud could pretend all he wanted, but that was the truth.

The other truth was that he wasn't supposed to be thinking about another woman anyway. He had a mate, he loved Mia, they had been together for years, had been destined for each other since they were children. None of that had changed, his feelings for his mate had not changed. It was just something new and dark. The woman with the fierce temperament who was not afraid to call him out in front of everybody was a fascination, no more.

He got to his rooms and found Mia lying down, the room dark, so he figured that she had another headache that ailed her. He wished that something was able to be done to help her. Mia had been sick well before they got married and as more pressure was put on her to produce an heir for Cloud, the more she wilted under the pressure. Cloud was not even the one who came up with the idea of a surrogate, it was Mia. It was probably not something that either one of them wanted, but it would mitigate the pressure and after several years of trying, it was becoming clear that she may never get pregnant at all.

He leaned down in the bed and gave her a kiss, asking her how she was feeling. Mia had a look on her face where she was about to

lie to him and tell him that everything was fine. He didn't really need to ask because the answer was written all over her face. She was having what they called a bad day. There were more and more of them lately and every time that she had a bad day, he wished more than anything that he could make it better for her.

“So how does the tournament go?” Mia asked with a grin.

“Why do I get the feeling that you love the idea of me being tortured by this?”

She giggled, a sound that he didn't hear enough. “Maybe because I am. I know that you hate this, and you will hate it even more when the winner is chosen, but it’s for both of us, just remember that.”

Cloud had been thinking about it in those terms, as some kind of sacrifice, but now, having met Moonlit, he was thoroughly convinced that she was going to be the one who would win and then she would be the one that he would get to be with. The fact that he wanted her, was attracted to her when she was close, made him feel guilty about the whole thing. He wasn't supposed to want it. It was supposed to be a sacrifice to get him an heir that they both knew he needed. The very fact that it was agreeable to him was hard to imagine. He could barely look at Mia, afraid that she would be able to read his innermost thoughts and know his betrayal. He hadn't done anything, of course, but what he was thinking about felt akin to that.

“I hear there's going to be an out-waller in the tournament.”

That got Cloud's attention and he looked up at his mate, trying to gauge her reaction to the information. He tried to pretend like he didn't care or that it was no big deal, but it was. The very fact that she was bringing it up should have told him Mia knew more than he wanted her to. Mia seemed to know what was really going on.

“Just one.”

Mia clicked her tongue. “I hear that there is a steep punishment if she fails.”

That comment embarrassed Cloud more than anything else, the fact that Mia knew about the extra caveat he’d added in. Even in the midst of it all, when his heart was beating a mile a minute and he was face to face with her in all her glory, Cloud knew that he didn't need everybody else on the other side of the wall trying to participate. It was special circumstances that he had even let her participate at all, and now, he had to explain himself to the one person he did not want to. The truth was that she was the only person that he had to explain himself to. He wouldn't explain himself because he had to, Cloud was Alpha after all and could do whatever the hell he wanted. He would explain himself because he was in love with her and only wanted to make her happy. He wished that there had been something more between them when they had finally mated and started their life together. They had both tried, but they had both decided rather quickly that while they could be great friends, it was probably all they would ever be.

“Yes, well, we can't have all the out-wallers trying to participate, can we?”

“Do you really want one of them to carry your child?” Mia wondered out loud. “I mean, it is going to be their DNA after all. Are we really so quick to find just anyone?”

“Now you know it's not like that at all. That's why we're having the tournament, so we can find the strongest for our heir. You'll always be the mother, no matter who the baby comes out of. We are looking for a strong surrogate to carry our child. Don't forget that. We both know that this has to happen,” Cloud concluded.

“Why her?”

The question was asked so simply that there was very little he could do but answer. He didn't want to, nothing good would come of it, but he knew at the same time that he had to say something. The

relationship he had with Mia, he knew that it would be better to tell her the truth. Then maybe she would understand and stop worrying about it, because all of a sudden, she was worried.

“There was something about her. I can't really honestly tell you what it is, but I felt it when I saw her the other day and then she showed up at the palace gates begging to be in the tournament. Felt like it was meant to happen,” he confessed.

Mia seemed to relax and smiled. “Isn't that the way of it? It just seemed like the thing to do.”

It was hard to judge how she really felt about anything. Cloud was waiting for more, but Mia said that she had a headache, and she probably wasn't going to make it to the festivities that night. Even though the tournament was to start the next day, there would be a lot of drinking and dancing and brave talk. Mia wanted him to go and get to know the women in the tournament, but what did it matter? Cloud had already made up his mind about Moonlit. She was going to win, it was fate. If she didn't win, it was going to be even more complicated to whisk her away to do his bidding, but Cloud was confident that he would find a way.

Mia sat up. “I think I want to meet her.”

Warning bells were going off in Cloud's mind, but he kept his composure and told her that it was probably a good idea. “For her to have caught your attention, I take it that she must be pretty impressive.”

More red alarms, but there really was nothing that Cloud could do about it. He just nodded his head and agreed, suddenly absorbed in his belt buckle that needed to be unlatched.

Cloud didn't like the way he felt. He felt like he was betraying his mate, something he promised to never do. Cloud wanted to keep his promise and he should have said more, how he really wanted Moonlit, but did not. It wasn't because he thought that Mia couldn't

handle it, they had a different sort of relationship. It was really because he couldn't handle it if she vetoed the idea. He didn't want Moonlit to be vetoed. He wanted her and it was not for surrogate. It was for his own selfish reasons.

Mia had made it clear that she needed some space, so he took off to give her just that. The more he thought about Moonlit and the possibilities, the more he hoped that the feeling he had was right. Cloud really wanted it to be true.

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Cloud wandered through the village, waving occasionally to boisterous partygoers. He should be enjoying himself too, but Cloud was having a hard time getting out of his head. All he could think about was the next day and the fact that he was going to have Moonlit one way or another.

He'd asked Mia one last time if she was sure she wanted to do it. Mia was the one that had come up with another woman carrying her child idea. She was constantly worried about producing an heir, constantly thinking about it, and he finally agreed just so that he could have a little bit more peace. He believed that she deserved peace too, but now it was far more complicated than it had sounded when they talked about it before.

Cloud wandered for quite some time until he found himself right on the outskirts of the outer walls. It was so different than just a few feet inside. There was order and everyone had a place inside of the wall. People were put into positions for what they were good at, whether they liked it or not. Cloud always secretly wondered what his life would have been like if he lived growing up on the other side. What would he have done if he would have had a choice? His life trajectory was decided as soon as he was born. The idea of being able to choose what he did when he woke up in the morning was apparently a bigger freedom than he had on the inside.

It was strange how a massive wall could change everything. He found himself curious how long it had been since he had been outside of the walls and really paid attention. Usually, Cloud was on a mission. He was either going to war, coming back from war, or making weapons at the lab for the next war. War was a part of life, something that he had come to understand early on when he first became Alpha. Cloud had hoped that his reign would be different, but he found himself in just as many skirmishes as his father had been in.

In the beginning, he had tried to stay out of them, but as time went on, he realized that he didn't have a choice. He had managed to keep his mind from all of it for so long, how could a few words spoken by a stranger make him question everything?

# Chapter 8

Mia

“I get what you're saying, I just don't understand why the hell I need to get naked in here with all these girls. What is the point?” Mia heard Moonlit ask.

“The point is you don't have a choice. This is part of the ceremony. It is at your queen’s demand.”

Mia listened for a few moments longer, wondering what would be said if anybody knew that she was there. She had come up with the crazy ritual in hopes of finding Moonlit and getting to know her better. Mia wanted to figure out what her husband saw in her. Whatever it was, Mia didn't think that it was going to take all that long to actually find out. She could hear her from the opening that she had just come in. Moonlit was an out-waller who did not know her place.

Mia had always tried to put herself in other people's shoes, but as an out-waller it was hard to do. It was such a fundamental difference, most people didn't even think of them as the same species. They were looked at as barely above humans. Sure, they were shifters, but they were the descendants of the clans who had lost the great battle hundreds of years ago. The clans that rebelled were permanently vilified, as well as their descendants. Mia had always wondered what it would be like to be born of a different clan. It was hard to imagine life any other way, but she knew that it had to be so different from her.

She listened to Moonlit trying to get out of the ritual group cleansing, but after she was told repeatedly that it was the only way she could be in the tournament and if she didn’t she would forfeit, then Moonlit started to have a change of heart.

As Mia walked into the room, Moonlit was taking off the last of her clothing and Mia wasn't the only one staring. She was slim and sleek, still fully curved with big bosoms. She had the body that men wanted and women would kill for. Mia was understanding even more what her husband saw in her. She was gorgeous and had dark, flowing locks that were well past her waist as she took it down.

Moonlit was still grumbling after she did what was asked of her because obviously she wanted to turn around and get dressed. There was a strange but powerful determination that was strong. For what they needed her to do, Mia understood that she would have to have all of those qualities.

Once she was noticed, Moonlit was expected to ask questions like all the rest. It was an honor to have Mia there, their queen to wish them good luck at the tournament. It was apparent to Mia that Moonlit did not see her as such. To her, it felt like Moonlit didn't see her as her queen at all. Like she wasn't even part of the same clan.

Mia moved in front of Moonlit in the large bathtub that could be used by at least ten people simultaneously and she stopped in front of Moonlit. She waited for Moonlit to cover herself like the rest of them did in modesty, but even though she was one of the youngest and definitely the odd one out, she did not hide herself, but stood proud, looking at her like she was daring her to say anything at all. Mia smiled and asked her why she was going to be in the tournament.

The woman’s bravado didn’t last very long. She looked down and quietly said that she’d just wanted a chance.

“Yet the chance comes at a high cost to you if you do beat all these women here. Do you think you will be able to do it?” the queen inquired.

It was a serious question and Mia waited for an answer, but all Moonlit said was that she was going to win because she had to.

“What do you mean, you have to?”

“It is one thing to be enslaved by your enemy, it’s another thing entirely to be personally enslaved by them. I have to win, because I can’t do that,” Moonlit said with force.

Mia could see why Cloud liked the outspoken, very beautiful, and young woman. She was made well, rounded hips that could carry a child, and strong personality to mix with Cloud and make a leader for the generation to come.

It was a lot of pressure, Mia felt it more sometimes than she would like. At the same time, there was nothing that she could really do about it.

“So why did you agree to it?” Mia pressed, really wanting to know.

“Either way I am enslaved. I might as well get the chance to be free for once. I don't know what I would do with the opportunity, but I would like to give it a shot.”

Mia understood her anger. She felt pity for the out-wallers and their fate. At the same time though, she knew that there was not much that any single person could do about it, even her. She had Cloud's ear, but even he couldn't do such an extraordinary thing as change hundreds of years of hate and separation. Just the fact that Moonlit was going to be in the tournament was a good start. She liked to be optimistic, and when she saw Moonlit, that’s exactly what she felt, optimistic.

She asked Moonlit a few more questions, and then she asked similar ones to the rest of the girls. Mia had the same feeling that Cloud did. Moonlit was hungry and she was going to win. It was just something that she knew without knowing. Moonlit was the one, for more than just the tournament. She was the woman they had been looking for.

Mia went back to her rooms and tried to ignore the feelings of jealousy that she just couldn't push away. She knew it was going to happen, it had to, and they'd talked about it in detail, but it was different when she was actually standing there. Mia was jealous of what she was going to do for Cloud, the one thing that she hadn't been able to, a very important thing.

Now that it was really going to happen, now that she had met the woman who her husband had hand-picked, Mia was overwhelmed. There was a loss that she hadn't seen coming, and Mia tried to pull herself together. She had a hard knot in her throat, but it had to be swallowed. Every reason that had brought them to the decision was still in place. Nothing had changed, even if Mia worried she was going to lose her mate for good.

Actually, she already knew for certain she would, and Moonlit was the woman that would have him after she was gone. Her idea was a whole lot to wrap her mind around.

# Chapter 9

## Moonlit

It was the day of the tournament and since there weren't too many like it, everybody showed up. Moonlit looked into the crowd several times, trying her best to calm down, but there were just so many people. She couldn't get over the crowd, not the women in the tournament itself. That was actually underwhelming and for the first time since she had agreed to such a ridiculous situation, Moonlit was hopeful that she might actually win. The alternative was not something that she wanted to think about.

Her first match was against a very large and very mad looking Royal. She was subjected to taunting not only from her opponent, telling her that she didn't belong there, but from the crowd as well. Moonlit let it get to her and it gave her the fire she needed to knock out the first woman in a few punches.

While shifting into wolves was normal for this type of tournament, the first knockout was done by Moonlit in her human form. She hadn't really thought about the consequences at the time. It was illegal to touch a royal as an out-waller, and she had just knocked one out in front of a lot of witnesses. Even though it was part of the tournament and she was pretty sure she wouldn't get in trouble, there was still the worried question in the back of her mind that made her wonder. Technically, she could be killed for what she had just done.

Moonlit wasn't arrested, but she was given some time to take a bit of a break before the next match. She only had to take out six women to win. When she had first thought of entering the tournament, it had felt impossible, but now, Moonlit was starting to

see that it very well could be done. She really could win this tournament and change her life completely. Then she would be able to live inside the walls where Moonlit always felt like she belonged. She would no longer have to listen to rules that were made for people like her. She wanted to be one of them, even as at the same time she hated them. It was complicated, but that was exactly what Moonlit was going through. Thankfully, she didn't have too long to think before the next match. If she had, she might have questioned why she was doing any of it, past the idea of proving everyone wrong.

It was too late to really question anything at that point though. Moonlit was either going to win or she was going to lose. Losing was probably the last thing that she wanted and the idea of being Cloud's personal slave for the rest of her life did not sit well with her at all. The idea of it pushed her to win her second and third match with as much ease as the first. She felt like she could take on the world.

The fourth match was a little bit harder though. Moonlit expected to have to fight in her original form. It was still awkward, and she didn't go into it at all until she was forced into it by her opponent. Moonlit wouldn't stand a chance against the wolf, certainly not one that was trained to attack. She had to be careful, make sure that she was on equal grounds, and when she finally shifted and was ready to attack, it was then that the fourth pulled out, making her the winner.

Moonlit didn't understand what had happened, but as she saw the woman limping off, she realized that she must have been hurt. They had tumbled around for a little while. It must have been something pretty serious for her to give up so easily. Moonlit couldn't believe it, most of the people in attendance at the tournament couldn't believe it. Moonlit had beaten all but two. Moonlit liked to think that it would in some way inspire them to believe that they were all the same and deserved to be treated the same way, but that was just a pipe dream, and she had not thought that way in a very long time. Optimism like that was dangerous.

There was a bit of a break before the last couple of matches. Moonlit only had to beat two more people, but she knew that competition was fierce. She also knew that everybody in the stands was waiting for her to fail. It was their nature and since she was considered an enemy by all, Moonlit knew that there would be many people who'd watch her fail and remind her of it. She would lose everything if she did.

"I see you're hitting your stride." A clear voice from beside her broke her thought.

Moonlit was sitting at a bench not too far from where the next match was going to start. She was not hitting her stride, she was trying to keep up. Moonlit knew the voice, it was hard to forget, and she looked over at her queen smiling back at her.

"I would like to think so, but the next two matches are going to be hard."

The queen disagreed with her sentiment. "You're far more vicious. You need to use it sooner. Overwhelm them, take them out quickly, and this will be over before nightfall."

Moonlit was surprised by two things. She was surprised that the queen cared enough to say anything to her. She also couldn't believe that not only did she matter, but the queen had taken notice enough that she really thought she could win. That was an honor in and of itself, even if everyone else was convinced of her failure.

"Thank you, I will keep that in mind for the next match."

"Telle is fierce, and she will not let up for even a moment. You must take her out and take her out quickly. It is the only way you will beat her," the queen relayed to Moonlit.

Moonlit agreed that she would, though she was still not sure why the queen was helping her at all. It felt much like cheating, but Moonlit would take all of the help that she could get.

Mia wished her well and told her that she would see her after the match. Moonlit wasn't sure what that was all about. She hadn't won yet, but Mia talked like she already had. Did she really believe in her like that?

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The fourth match was a doozy and Moonlit thought several times that she was going to lose. If she hadn’t done what Mia instructed, she definitely would have lost. Mia had given her a clue that was needed and while she was thankful for it, Moonlit still didn't understand the reason for her help. She’d never met the king and queen before that day, so why in less than twenty-four hours had they completely changed her life?

There was a short intermission, maybe only ten minutes, before the final battle. It was going to be dark soon, and Mia had been right. The matches would be over not too long after. Moonlit just wasn't sure how exactly it was going to end. She wanted to believe that she could be as optimistic as Mia was, but there was still that sinking feeling and words in the back of her mind of how she was not as good as them. She had been taught her whole life that she was less than, they were better. It was a lot to push aside and pretend like she didn't believe. Sometimes, Moonlit didn't believe that they were equal, and the feeling haunted her. She had to push it away, because it would do nothing to change what was going to happen next. Moonlit had to at least pretend that she was standing on the same footing as them.

The last woman that she had to fight was named Denarii. She was an older woman, mid-thirties, and about ten years older than Moonlit. She looked like she hated the world and though Moonlit didn't understand it, she had her own well of rage that she could call on when need be. She prepared herself for the fight, knowing that the next few minutes were going to change the course of her life one way or the other. It would either make it better or worse, but either way it was changing. She was never going to be an out-waller again

and Moonlit still wasn't sure how to take that. It was her identity, it was who she had been forever. What would she be now?

All this was playing in her head while she was circling Denarii. She made her move quickly, just like Mia had suggested she would. It was like the tournament was already known to the queen somehow. Mia was convinced that she would win. She wanted to win for her, just because nobody ever believed in her. It was nice to have someone who did, even if it made no sense why.

Moonlit immediately went for the jugular. It was not customary, it was better to dance around for a little while. Moonlit didn't know this, and she certainly didn't care. She was focused only on beating the dark-skinned woman who had taken out all the rest. Denarii was what was standing between her and a different life. Simply put, Moonlit didn't think she was any better, she just wanted it more.

Moonlit was announced as the winner, a surprise to everyone in attendance and to Moonlit herself. She couldn't believe it. She had won. There was confusion in the crowd and then the king himself stood up and gave her a round of applause. Light sounds like applause followed after, but it was nothing like any kind of joy. It was forced applause, but Moonlit would take it. It really didn't matter now, she had won! Moonlit couldn’t believe it. Her whole body was shaking and all she kept thinking to herself was that she could finally stop being a slave and stop doing what other people wanted her to do. She finally got to be her own person and the very idea of it filled her with such joy that Moonlit could barely focus on anything else.

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There was supposed to be a dinner at the end of the tournament, but instead of getting to go, Moonlit was whisked away and taken to what was being called her new home. She got a house on the hill just like promised and she wanted to pinch herself she was so excited. Was it possible to want something and hate it, all at the same time?

When Moonlit saw her new home, she was close to floating with pleasure. She couldn't believe that for once, she actually had a place of her own and Moonlit was finally behind the wall. She was part of the in-crowd, even if she would always be an out-waller. Now she would get better food, people would stop telling her what to do. Moonlit wouldn’t have to worry about random attacks at night while she slept. It was going to be great.

Moonlit went into the small house, nothing too fancy, but far more luxurious than anything she’d ever lived in. It was much like the armor she was still wearing, made from quality material, so it didn't need to be flashy. Cheap things needed to have flair to them, while well-made things just had to be. Moonlit was learning the difference quite quickly, touring her new home and feeling the difference in everything. The coffee table was smooth and glossy, the carpets were plush, and the couch completely encompassed her when she sat down. She laid down on the bed for a moment, closed her eyes and felt like she was truly in heaven. How else could she describe it?

“I see you have found the bed. Good. It’s going to be an important part of your new life here.”

Moonlit's head jerked up by his words, but also by the fact that Cloud was there. What was he doing in her bedroom? What did he mean by her new role there? Moonlit swallowed hard, turned her head to Cloud, and asked him what he meant. She probably didn't want to hear the answer but knew she was going to ask anyway. She had told herself that it was too good to be true. Moonlit had forgotten for a moment that it really was.

# Chapter 10

Cloud

“Part of my new stay here? I thought if I won the tournament, I got to live here? That is what you told everyone,” Moonlit reminded him. Her eyes were shifty, and she was unsure of everything. Cloud couldn’t believe how beautiful she was, even more so now that he knew what was going to come next. He was looking forward to what came next.

She was clearly already getting agitated. Moonlit had a ferocity that he wanted his children to have. It was the first time he had ever thought about his heir as his child. Cloud knew that in the back of his mind it was the same thing, but it was the first time he felt like it was the same thing. It made a big difference apparently, especially in the way that he felt about it. Kids? Cloud was getting ahead of himself. He needed Moonlit to agree first.

“Well, not everything that you heard was true. Part of it was to get strong women to compete, and we needed someone here, up in this cabin.”

Moonlit was at the edge of her seat, trying to figure out what all of it meant. She didn't ask anything more, just patiently waited and then unnerved Cloud. If it would have been anybody else, the next part would have been easy for Cloud. He would have merely talked to them about duty, something that Royals understood. Out-wallers didn’t understand loyalty because they had no reason to. Cloud wasn't under any misconception of how they were treated. After seeing them the day before scratching around in freedom, he pitied them. Neither one of those feelings made sense when it came to Moonlit. Pitying her didn’t really make any sense.

“So, I'm just going to say it. You're going to be shocked, and I will explain everything.”

He could see that Moonlit was bracing herself and Cloud wished suddenly just for a moment, that she was like everyone else. That she would take what he was going to offer her as just that, an offer. She would also accept her fate and actually want to do it. If it was anybody else, all of those things would be in place. With Moonlit though, she was not going to take it in the same positive way. Cloud didn't know much, but he knew that much.

He resolved himself. He was the Alpha, and it was her duty to do what he said. He reminded himself of that, just before he started in. It was harder than he thought it would be. It should have been easy.

“The queen and I need someone special. We are giving you the chance to carry the next heir of our kingdom. As you can imagine, it is a great honor,” Cloud continued.

He stopped, because her mouth went open and she just kind of stared at him for several moments. It was like she hadn’t heard it right and wanted him to repeat it. Cloud didn’t. She knew exactly what he had said and just because she was having a hard time dealing with it, didn't mean that he was going to repeat himself. She knew what he wanted.

He waited for an answer and when he got one, it certainly was not the one he was hoping for or even expecting. It didn't take long at all for her to refuse him.

“If that's what it takes to live here, being with you, then there is no way that I want to stay here,” Moonlit concluded. He couldn’t help but marvel at just how different Moonlit really was. She was turning down the chance of a lifetime for someone like her.

The way she said it, acting like it was by far the worst thing she could possibly think of, made him angry. She noticed it and asked him if he was going to force her. Cloud wanted to say he would, just

so that she would do what he wanted, but he couldn't even say it out loud, not even for effect.

He scoffed. “No, I'm not going to force you.”

“Will you let me leave? I can be out of your hair in no time.”

Nothing was going the way Cloud had seen it going in his head. He groaned loudly and asked her why she had to make it so complicated.

“Everyone else would find it an honor,” Cloud said, not able to help the bitterness that crept in. Why couldn’t she be like everyone else?

“That's because everyone else would be a mind-controlled Royal. I'm not and never will be. The idea of carrying your child does not fill me with glee as you apparently expect it to.”

Cloud growled low in the back of his throat and while he didn't mean to, he was letting his emotions get the best of him. Cloud wasn’t used to being told no. No one told him no. Soldiers, leaders, everyone did as he commanded. So why couldn't this one female? Why did she have to be so damn complicated?

“There was a reason we didn't let out-wallers in.”

“If I would have known it had something to do with you and your heir, I wouldn't have pushed to be in the tournament,” Moonlit continued.

Cloud just couldn't get over the fact that she didn't want to be a part of it. He was ready to start, and she should be as well. How could he feel something and she didn't?

“You did push to be in the tournament, and you won. We need a surrogate to carry my heir and you will do it,” Cloud said with a hard tone.

Moonlit said that he was going to have to force her and even then she was going to fight. Cloud had come there for something else completely different, and he was disgusted when he left. What kind of man did she think he was?

Cloud left frustrated and sure that Mia and he had made a horrible decision. It was all his fault too. He had picked her out of lust, not really thinking about the consequences, like the fact that Moonlit wanted nothing to do with it. She wanted to live among them, but she did not want to participate in other ways.

He left knowing that he had screwed up and everything that was depending on him had failed. It was all for nothing. Cloud didn't want another woman to carry his child. He wanted his child to have Moonlit's strength and courage. Cloud wasn't going to just let it go. He couldn't. He was just going to regroup and figure out another way. Cloud did not just easily give up. A damn woman wasn't going to beat him.

Mia was waiting for him when he got back. "That was quick. I figured you would do a better job than that."

She had a smile on her face. She'd wanted children for a long time and a surrogate would be the only way that she got one. She was looking forward to it. Cloud did not want to have to tell her that he had screwed it up. That was probably the last thing that he wanted to admit.

"She's not going for it, Mia."

"What do you mean?" Mia looked concerned. "She is one of your subjects and all you have to do is tell her to do it."

Cloud sighed. "What am I supposed to do, take advantage of her, force her?" His frustration was clear, and Mia tried to make him feel better. "She's crazy to tell you no."

Cloud chuckled. “Didn’t you say the same thing when you came here?”

“It was different, it was always going to be me and you. I felt like your wife and mate before I ever met you.”

Cloud blew out a breath of frustration. “Well, this one does not feel the same way.”

“Obviously, you're just going to have to show her that it is her duty to do this. We both know it.”

Cloud kissed Mia and said what they were both thinking. “I wish we didn't have to do this.”

Mia agreed, nodding sadly. “I wish we didn't have to do this either, but we do. Give her some time, let her come to grips with her new reality, and then maybe she will come around.”

Cloud sighed. “Come around, can you believe it? I have to wait for an out-waller to come around.” He shook his head, still not believing it. Nothing was going as planned and Cloud desperately wanted everything to turn around. He would never admit it, but he desperately wanted Moonlit for himself.

# Chapter 11

Mia

The next morning, Mia waited until Cloud left to train before she went to visit the woman who was going to change everything for her. Cloud was her mate, but he was not able to make a child with her. While it hurt her and she wished it was not true, Mia had long since gotten used to the idea of it. She was convinced that all Moonlit needed was a bit more prompting and she would do what was needed of her. Mia had to at least try, knowing that Cloud would never force himself on a woman, even if it was desperately needed. He would never do something like that, so she was going to have to change Moonlit's mind.

It didn't seem so easy a task, especially when Moonlit was so against it. Mia tried to understand her. It would be easy to dislike everyone who lived inside the walls. Mia was shocked to find out how the people on the other side felt about her, but she now knew the truth. She now saw it for what it truly was, and Mia hoped that she could somehow convince Moonlit that it was all the way it was supposed to be.

She was far more nervous than she should have been. She was the queen after all. At the moment though, Mia wasn't queen. She was just a woman who was desperate to become a mother.

Mia knocked on the door, trying desperately to pull herself together. She was waiting for an answer, waiting for the next part of her life to commence and all she could do was sit there and tremble slightly, feeling so out of touch with reality.

Moonlit came to the door after a few knocks, ready to curse, and then saw her queen standing there. While Cloud might not be her

king, Mia could see the difference with how she was treated. Moonlit wasn't happy to see her, but she certainly wasn't upset about it.

Mia asked to come in and Moonlit said nothing, agreeing to it by moving over and letting her come in. Mia hoped that it was a good sign. She was nervous to be there, to ask such a thing of anyone, no matter what side of the wall she lived on.

“Would you like something to drink?” Moonlit asked, barely looking at her. Mia agreed that she did and waited for Moonlit to make some tea. Moonlit had only been there overnight, and she didn't have any of her things yet. Mia would have liked something more to get to know her, something else to talk about besides what she was really there for.

When she came back with tea, Mia was as hopeful as when she started. It shouldn't be that hard. As she had told Cloud, they were their subjects. Why was it so complicated?

“What can I do for you, my queen?”

Mia smiled. “If you would treat my husband with the same revere and respect, I would not be here.”

“Your husband asked too much of his subjects. It's way too much for the subjects that he treats so badly. I can't see too many people agreeing to such a thing,” Moonlit said, no longer looking at Mia, too embarrassed.

“I suppose that many people would find it an honor.”

Moonlit scoffed, which made Mia smile because it was so unlike how anybody else would handle it. She was not blind; Mia saw how everyone looked at her husband. He was quite handsome, everyone thought so.

There was another reason that Moonlit was refusing to do it, but Mia couldn’t understand it.

“Many people think that my husband is handsome. You are not of that mind?” Mia pressed.

Moonlit agreed wholeheartedly and again it was amazing to Mia the irony of it all. Of course, the one woman that he had chosen was the one woman that he just couldn't have. Mia could see the hilarity in it, even if it was frustrating.

She took a drink of her tea and sat back on the couch. “Do you like this place?”

Moonlit agreed and said that it was nice, but it wasn't nice enough to make her do such a thing.

“You would rather leave?” Mia couldn’t imagine her wanting to go back to such a life, but when Moonlit agreed, she sighed. Mia was at her wit’s end. “Why won't you help me?”

Mia had not been expecting to say such a thing. She was queen after all and could never be seen as weak or desperate, just like her husband couldn't. She felt it in that moment though, everything that she wanted was so close but so far away at the same time. She could feel it slipping out of her grasp, knowing, somehow just knowing, that it had to be quick, or she would never get it done. There was an impending doom looming over her head, had been for months, and Mia had felt more than once that it was now or never.

Moonlit finally looked at her, met her gaze, and really looked at her. “How would it be for you? It won't even be your child.”

Mia felt the pain of the blow and tried to glance it off of her and not let it stick. She worried about that herself. The same question went through her own mind, and Mia did not truly believe that it was Moonlit's intent to hurt, but to query.

“The baby would be mine when it is born. You're just going to carry it for us. You are going to bring the next king into the world, a great honor.”

Another scoff and Moonlit clicked her tongue. Mia realized that it was the wrong way to go about it. That was the way that she would approach it if the woman she was speaking to was of the same ilk as her. Moonlit was not. She had not been raised to cherish loyalty above all else, like she and Cloud had been. Out-wallers had a different code, but Mia still suspected that she could talk to her woman to woman.

“Fine, if you don't have any desire to help the clan that has sheltered and protected you all this time, then think about it as a personal favor to me. I cannot carry a child; we have tried for years, but nothing has happened. There is pressure from all angles for an heir to be born. Every time Cloud goes out to fight, there is a good chance that he will not come back. He needs an heir waiting here to keep his legacy going,” Mia said.

“Would it be so horrible if he lost it?” Moonlit asked out loud.

Mia nodded that it would be. “There would be a power grab and it would not be pretty. Many people would die, and his father might pick up the title again. That would be far worse.”

It was silent for a moment. Mia hoped that it meant that Moonlit was at least thinking about it. For the life of her, she wanted to understand Moonlit, but they were just so far apart in breeding, that it was hard to even imagine it.

“I want to help you, but I don't know if I can help you in this way. Your husband...”

Her voice trailed off and Mia waited for something more. She noticed that Moonlit had not called him her king, not once. It was something that was punishable by death if she wanted to push it, but Mia would not be responsible for taking the life of such a strong woman that was able to say such things and not care about the repercussions. Or she was ignorant of the repercussions, so she wouldn't have to worry about it. Either way, Mia was buckling under

all the pressure and the only way to fix it was to put that pressure on someone else.

“Cloud is a good man when you get to know him. He is honor-bound and probably won't even feel it. He has just as much pressure on him to make an heir, he knows that his life is only there to keep his people safe. He takes that very seriously and he would take this seriously.”

Moonlit could barely keep eye contact. “I've never done anything like that before. I wouldn’t even know where to start.”

“Well, of course, you never carried an heir for someone else before. Who else would you do it for?” Mia asked, not even realizing what was truly meant in those words. When she understood, she just kind of looked at her and then it all made sense and she smiled. “That's even better, you will be fresh for the king, untouched.”

Moonlit didn't want to hear anything about the king, and she pressed her lips together. Mia was starting to understand more of the adamant denial to doing such a thing. It wasn't because Moonlit hated him, though she probably did; it was something more. She was frightened and Cloud was an intimidating man. Mia remembered when they had first been married and she had worried about the same thing. Cloud was large and gave women thoughts that were harder to contend with, even for her.

“I could be there for you, while it is happening,” Mia suggested.

Moonlit got even more nervous, and Mia told her that it was whatever made her feel more comfortable.

“Doing that in front of you will not make me more comfortable.”

Mia agreed, relieved. “I don't think that it would. I don't know how to do this. This is really a last-ditch effort if I'm being completely honest with you. I don’t know what else to do and I’ve dragged Cloud along for the ride as well. He tried to refuse me too, but he can’t.”

“Why the tournament and all of the games? Why not just pick someone that is in your circle?”

“There's nobody there that I want to be a part of it.”

Moonlit nodded. “I can imagine that would be embarrassing. You would have to see them all the time. Me, I’d be hiding away and out of sight.”

Mia disagreed. “It has nothing to do with that. It has to do with the fact that they don't have what it takes to be the mother of the king's children. A woman needs to have fire inside of her, she needs integrity, beauty, all the things that you possess. We chose you, both of us, because we knew you would win the tournament, because you were the best, and we want only the best for the next heir. I want the best for my children. That is why we chose you.”

Moonlit was quiet for quite some time, obviously rolling it around in her head, making Mia wait with anticipation that increased tenfold every second. While she wanted to believe that Moonlit was the right one, she wasn’t sure if that was true or not. She could be wrong, but she didn’t think so, not about this.

“Fine, I'll do it,” Moonlit finally said, breaking the agonizing silence for Mia. She felt relief wash over her and she asked Moonlit if she was sure.

“I don't know if I'm sure, my queen, but you must have said all the right things, because how can I deny you?”

Mia hugged her, going outside of protocol, but she couldn’t help it. Mia had known all along that she was on the right track, had made the right decisions, but now she knew for certain.

“I can never thank you enough.”

Moonlit moved back. “Just know that I'm doing this for you, no other reason.”

Mia agreed, though she suspected that would change after Moonlit was around Cloud a bit, if he acted the way he did around her. He had a cover, he had to look like a strong leader all of the time, no matter what. Mia knew that there was a soft center, and when Mia had found it, she could never look at him the same. Moonlit was going to find the same thing out that Mia knew and then she would feel differently. Anyone who truly knew Cloud, couldn't resist him. Mia hoped that she was right about it, a lot depended on Cloud doing the right thing. Now more than ever, she needed him to be the man that she knew him to be.

# Chapter 12

Cloud

When Cloud was told that he needed to go back and see Moonlit, his first reaction was to disagree. “Mia, I told you before, she's not going to do it. I don't think she has changed her mind in a few hours.”

“I know for a fact that she has. I went to talk to her.”

“You did? Christ, Mia. You shouldn’t have gone over there alone.”

“Like you said, it wasn't going to work the way you were handling it. I handled it, and now she has agreed. That agreement might not last forever, so you might want to get a move on,” Mia repeated.

Cloud considered if Mia had lost her mind. “What are you talking about?”

“Come on, honey. I usually don't have to repeat myself. Moonlit has agreed to carry your child. While I will admit she probably wishes that it could be done in another way, she knows that it cannot be. She knows what's at stake and she knows that her secrecy is everything. She's going to do this for us, Cloud, and you need to be on your best behavior.”

Cloud scowled. “I was nothing but nice to her the first time. I put her in the tournament to begin with.”

“Yes, and then you told her that you lied about everything, and she was going to be carrying your child. How did you think that was going to go? Intimidation isn’t going to work. She can't stand you.”

Cloud frowned and told Mia that she wasn't helping anything. Mia agreed, knowing that she wasn't, but obviously she didn't care. Cloud didn’t want to care about it, but Cloud didn’t like hearing that he was despised. Was that really how Moonlit felt? Had he been so naïve to think that she would be honored?

“You don't think that it would be better to give her some time to get used to the idea?” Cloud wondered, only slightly suggesting it because he didn’t know if he could go to her in such a position.

Mia disagreed. “I don't think that's going to work at all. I think that you need to get down there before she changes her mind. The more she thinks about it, the less she's going to be likely to do it.”

Cloud felt disgusted. He couldn't believe that this was his life. There had been a moment of curiosity and excitement when he thought about Moonlit, but now, it felt just like another chore, something else that he had to do, another box to check off on his to-do list. To know that she was so appalled by the idea of it did not help at all.

Mia went into the storeroom and brought back a couple purple bottles of wine and some glasses.

“It needs to be tonight, Cloud. Go to her. We both know you want to do this.”

Cloud wanted to contest the words, but he knew better than to do so. They had been together too long. Mia knew him too well and she had probably known the whole time. He never put anything past her.

“I can tell you with all honesty that I am wanting to do it less and less.”

Mia gave Cloud a kiss on the cheek. “I know this isn't how you saw it going but have faith that this is how it is supposed to be.”

Cloud agreed, trying not to think about what he had to do next. He walked the path to where he was going. It was coveted surroundings, and they were beautiful. Magic increased its beauty with extra flowers, extra green and blue in the sky. It was the closest he had been able to create heaven on earth and a feeling of peace came over him. Everything was going to be fine, that's what he repeated to himself. Mia believed and he had to too.

He knocked on the door, but there was no answer. It was only her second day there, and she'd already left? Was the idea of being with him so horrible that she ran away from heaven and back to hell just to avoid him? Cloud did not believe that Moonlit had had a change of heart, even though Mia was convinced that she had. Moonlit seemed too stubborn to give up so easily, especially when he could still so clearly remember the look of disgust on her face when he had suggested the surrogacy.

There she was, standing in front of him with wide eyes, and Cloud's tongue stilled as he tried to find the right words. It didn't mean anything, Moonlit said nothing. She did not offer him a smile or any kind of encouragement to be there. She didn't look at him like a hostile, but close enough.

Cloud was surprised when she went immediately to the bed, getting underneath the covers and waiting for him to do what he was going to do. Cloud didn't know what to do. His body wanted to move forward but his mind was kind of repulsed with the whole thing. He didn't want her like this, he didn't want any woman like that, and instead of moving toward her and the bed, Cloud asked her if she wanted a drink. While she did not think that she needed one, Cloud knew that he did.

"Mia didn't say anything about a drink. She was very clear what you needed, and I agreed to that," Moonlit said in a small voice.

Cloud sighed, hoping that things would be a little different, but he should have known better. "If you do not want to drink with me, then do not drink with me. I'm the one that needs the drink."

Moonlit screwed up her face. “So, you have to get drunk first for it to work?” She was slightly offended and hurt. Cloud didn't know what to say to such a comment, to half the things that came out of her mouth because there was no filter on it. She just blurted out comments that no one else would.

“I have never done this before, been with someone that was so against it. You don’t look at me with lust, you look at me with hatred. That’s a hard emotion to get past and just do it.” Cloud sniped back. He was just as offended. Cloud didn’t want to be with anyone who didn’t want him. He shouldn’t be drinking, knowing what was to come next. He’d never imagined that he would be drinking by himself. He wanted so badly to tell her, command her to take a drink with him, but knew that it would do no good. He didn’t want to force her. He wanted Moonlit to come to him willingly, in all ways.

“I won’t talk, you won’t know how I truly feel,” Moonlit suggested.

That had Cloud scoffing himself. It was like she didn’t understand how any of it worked. He took a drink of the wine, finished the glass, and poured another. He poured one for Moonlit and asked her to drink with him. He didn’t want to drink alone.

“I’m pretty sure there are rules against the two of us drinking together,” Moonlit snarked.

“Yes, well, I am the damn king, so what I say, goes,” Cloud shot back, his voice rising from his own frustration of the situation, not anger. It didn’t matter either way, Moonlit didn’t respond to it. She got up, drank the glass, and put it back down. She didn’t taste it, looking at him the whole time.

“Are you happy, *my king*?” Moonlit inquired with a false smile that she didn’t even try to improve. Moonlit wanted him to know exactly how she felt about all of it.

Cloud grunted a response, knowing that Moonlit was just trying to get it over with. It was written all over her face. He was shocked

when she moved back to the bed, this time, right in view of him. Moonlit started to take her clothes off and though she didn't want him to enjoy it, Moonlit couldn't stop that. His body responded at once, her perfect, curved body in his sight.

Moonlit wasn't wearing any under garments, just what was given to her by him. Now, she was completely bare, and Cloud's mouth was suddenly dry. All he could do was look at her, his body frozen in place. In his mind, he was already covering her body and sliding inside of her hot heat. It was what he was there to do after all. The wine already buzzing in his ears and Moonlit's flesh on full display caused it to be so.

"This is what you want, like this?" Cloud asked, slightly less appalled and so turned on that it didn't really matter how he felt about it.

Moonlit agreed with the sentiment, saying to him that she just wanted to get it over with. That was hard for Cloud's ego to hear, but his body didn't seem all that worried about it. He stood up and went to the edge of the bed, taking his clothes off with purpose, watching the woman's eyes as she took in his hard body and his bouncing need that kept her eyes riveted. Moonlit might not like him, but he was going to make sure that she did after that night. Cloud was certain of his skills and knew that Moonlit would be like all the rest when it came down to it. He could already feel her desire ramping up. His need for her was at full tilt.

Cloud moved on the bed, watching Moonlit's eyes follow a part of him, looking at it like it might 'get' her or something. It wasn't the normal way that women responded to him. Not even human women were afraid when it was time. It was a confusing emotion to feel right then, and he leaned down over her body to kiss her, keeping his weight on his arms, not wanting to crush her.

He tried to kiss her, but Moonlit refused the kiss, telling him that it wasn't necessary. Cloud wanted to tell her that it was, force her to

comply in the way that he wanted, yet knowing that it wasn't going to happen.

"I would have liked to have done this differently," Cloud admitted. "I have to at least get you ready."

His hand went between her legs, and she stiffened up and gasped as he touched her. She was already so wet, Cloud's need twitched, and he moved back over her, positioning himself. "I guess you already are."

Cloud moved forward in one hard thrust, pushing deep and feeling the breakage of her innocence. Moonlit called out, more of a scream and he looked down, her eyes closed and her face in a state of shock and pain. That wasn't at all the reaction that he was expecting, and Cloud just stayed in her, unmoving and trying to figure out how the hell she could be untouched for so long. She was at least in her early twenties. Cloud was shocked, his own heart beating a mile a minute. He wanted to move. The crushing weight of her untouched insides was torturous and each time she clenched him, trying to get him out, his body was massaged in a unique way. Moonlit didn't even know what she was doing, but she was thoroughly driving him mad.

He didn't want to pull out but needed to. It wasn't at all the way that he had seen it going. Cloud wasn't going to allow it to continue in the same vein. He hadn't realized that he was going to be her first. He would have gone about it differently. He was going to have to do things differently, now that he knew, even if his mind screamed at him when he was pulling out.

"What are you doing? Don't you have to do more?" Moonlit asked, her eyes still closed. She was likely still dealing with the way that Cloud had entered her so quickly. Cloud filled with guilt. He wouldn't have done it that way. Cloud was no longer going to listen to Moonlit about what she did or didn't want. How could she have any real opinions, when she knew nothing about what came next between a man and a woman?

“I’m going to do a lot more, Moonlit. You should have told me.” Cloud concluded, lifting and going back to his knees. He was bound to make it right and had to settle his nerves before he moved back to her. Cloud was still in a state of shock, wondering how a perfect woman like Moonlit was untouched. She’d surely been courted, chased, by all men if they were smart. He was racked with guilt, but also luck. The very idea of it got to him. He was going to be her first, a bond that would never be broken. Why did Cloud get such a kick out of that?

# Chapter 13

Moonlit

She asked him again what he was doing, her body taking a break without his large manhood inside of her, ripping her asunder. Moonlit was afraid to open her eyes and see disappointment in Cloud's. She had a multitude of feelings going through her. Moonlit was trying her best to focus on it being over, but Cloud dragged her to him. Her eyes opened about the time that his mouth devoured her core. Moonlit yelped, this time in pleasure and not pain, though the sound was eerily similar.

Moonlit tried to close her legs, stop whatever it was he was doing, but it did her no good. Cloud was so much stronger, and he had decided that's what she was doing. Moonlit squirmed, trying to get away from his hungry mouth and the intense feelings of pleasure that took over her. Moonlit could deal with the pain that his entry had created, but she couldn't handle what he was doing to her now. Moonlit felt like she was going to pass out, her body heating up and then exploding from the inside.

Her body jerked from his kiss and she pushed back, desperate to get away from him. Moonlit had never felt so worked up in all of her life. It wasn't just once. He turned her body against her, but so many times that Moonlit lost count, lost sight of everything. She called out his name, even though she didn't want to. She begged for more, less, squeezed his head to lessen his touch, but he only held her open with his strong hands and put all of his attention on her.

Moonlit felt like she was going to pass out, but even then, she knew that there was more. He was there to fill her, not this. Whatever this was.

“Please, I need you inside of me!” Moonlit practically shouted.

He raised up for a second. “Beg your king, Moonlit.”

Her eyes closed as she came again, her muscles tightening up for the umpteenth time. Moonlit couldn’t take much more. His mouth was very ravenous and threatened to never stop.

“Please, my king!” She gave in and said the words he wanted to hear. Only then did Cloud let up, enabling her to breathe and close her legs. Her eyes met his and Cloud’s had changed. He was closer to his animal side, eyes glowing, reason further away from his face. He wiped his mouth and then leaned down for a kiss, ignoring her protests.

Moonlit felt electricity when their lips met, and while she didn’t want to feel anything at all, she did. Her body melted into the mattress underneath her, legs opening back up for him without her knowing it. He was inside of her, his lips still on hers and Moonlit called out, unable to stop the sound. It wasn’t of pain, what she had expected when he first started to push in. Now, it was a feeling much like when his mouth was on her, but somehow the spark was deeper inside.

His lips left hers and his eyes willed hers to stay open. It was hard though, Moonlit wanted to close her eyes to the desire running through her. She wanted to fight all of the feelings that he was erupting inside of her. Moonlit wasn’t supposed to feel anything. She was doing this for Mia, but she was feeling pleasure from it. She wasn’t supposed to.

“You can try to fight me all you want to, little one, but you are mine now. Your mind can fight it, but your body will not,” he said with a smug smile.

Her nails bit into his back. His large body moved with surprising grace and fluidity. She cried out several times, his long strokes bringing her back to orgasm. Cloud went on like that for a while.

Moonlit didn't know it could last so long. She didn't know much, but she had seen couples come and go. Cloud went on for what felt like hours. Every time he would speed up and she thought he would finish, Cloud would slow down and start increasing the tempo again, pushing her to the edge.

Moonlit resisted the push toward ecstasy as long as she could, but it moved over her like a tidal wave, throwing her off course and changing her forever. Moonlit clung to him as he intensified the feelings that he left in her. She called out his name, even calling him her king again when prompted. Moonlit transformed underneath Cloud, feeling better than she ever had in her life. At the same time, when he filled her with his seed, Moonlit hated herself for liking it. It wasn't a duty; it was something else.

Moonlit had fallen for the enemy and when he pulled her up against him after it was over, she resisted, but at the same time, wanted to be nowhere else. She fell asleep in his arms, content, and hating herself all the same.

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He was gone when she woke up and Moonlit expected no less. She was still trying to recover from the night before, what had happened between them, how she felt changed. With Cloud gone, she could go out and about, see her friend Oleander. When she was showing, Moonlit knew that she would be confined to the cabin, maybe already was supposed to be now, but Moonlit had to see Oleander. She needed to be reminded of her old life. It had only been a couple of days, but she felt separated from the woman she had once been.

Moonlit didn't know if she was supposed to leave or not, so she ran out without anyone seeing her. Moonlit felt like she was being watched, but every time she turned around, expecting Cloud or one of his goons to be there, it never happened. Instead, Moonlit was left to take care of herself, which was just the way she liked it. As long as she had told herself that she wanted on the inside of the gates,

she breathed easier when she was on the outside again. That's where she felt like she belonged.

She walked through the marketplace, waved hello to several people, and saw the looks that she was getting. She was no longer one of them, or at least that was what they thought. Moonlit was like everyone else, she just had to live somewhere else. She had so much responsibility that she had to focus on.

Oleander was a sight for sore eyes, and she wanted to know what was going on, what her new life was like. Moonlit had thought the same thing, that everything would change, just not in the way that she had imagined. She hadn't expected to fall for Cloud, make love to a king, none of it had been on her agenda. Now, Moonlit could think of nothing else.

"You look different. What has happened to you?" Her friend wanted to know.

The differences that Oleander were talking about were the small changes that had been made on the outside. She had new clothes and now that she had the time to do her hair, there was actually someone who did it for her. Moonlit had never been in a place that had everything she needed. She didn't have to go anywhere, but that was part of the point. Cloud wanted her where he could keep an eye on her and his heir.

She touched her stomach and wondered if she was already carrying the man's child. It was possible. She wasn't sure how to feel about it, but it was what she had signed up for. It was natural to have second thoughts about it, surely.

"I have gotten a small house on the hill, just like they said I would."

"What else?" Oleander wanted to know everything and any other time, Moonlit would have told her. She couldn't though, not this time. She wanted to tell someone what was expected of her and what she

was supposed to do, but Moonlit had promised to keep it to herself, no matter how impossible it seemed.

“I have met with the king. He congratulated me on winning.”

Oleander practically swooned, telling Moonlit how lucky she was. Moonlit didn’t feel that way though. She honestly wasn’t sure how to feel. Moonlit wanted to think that she was no different, but she knew she was. Not only had she made a pact with the enemy to carry his son and help his bloodline to continue, but she had fallen for him in a way the night before. He would always be her first, something that couldn’t be changed.

“He also gave me some money that I can use for whatever I want. I think there is more to come, and I know what I want to do with it,” Moonlit said.

“What?”

“I am going to help the cause. Now, I will use their own money against them. They can’t make us live like this forever.”

Oleander scoffed. “You should be happy where you are. You aren’t treated that way now.”

It was Moonlit’s turn to click her tongue in disgust. “We will never be anything more than slaves to them. I am sure they will find a way to get something out of me before it’s over. I don’t think that part of them changes. We are just here to service them.” Her voice turned bitter at the end. Moonlit didn’t know what to think or say about it all. She wished that it had been perfect, exactly as it was advertised. But it wasn’t. No matter how good Cloud felt, he was using her like every other Royal shifter did. That’s just what they did.

When she left Oleander, she was feeling a bit better that the world hadn’t changed while she was gone, but also because she got to see Oleander. Going back to the cabin though, Moonlit wasn’t sure what to feel. She felt used, but hopeful. Moonlit thought of Mia

and how crushed the woman had felt with the desire to have his baby. She had put it on Moonlit, but it added a little something extra because if she succeeded in her promise to Mia, she was breaking a promise to herself to take them down. How could she, when her very actions were propping him up for years to come? That was a hard one to wrap her head around. Nothing was as it seemed.

Moonlit was exhausted when she got back to the cabin. It was a long way from the outside of the wall. Moonlit knew that she wouldn't be able to make that trip much longer. She knew that soon she would be showing and there would be a rule that she wouldn't be able to be seen by anyone. Moonlit would be in her cabin for the next several months. She would be well taken care of from what she'd been told, but how was she going to be able to stay where she was, inside for so long? It was going to be hard.

She was about to go to bed when she heard a hard knock on the door. Moonlit was alarmed by the sound, not knowing who would be there at that time. She had no clue and almost didn't answer it. Moonlit was not expecting anyone, certainly not Cloud who was waiting on the other side of the door. He had his hands full of bags, letting himself in. Moonlit could only move out of his way.

"What's all this?" she asked.

"Just some things to keep you going. I figured that you would need some things. All you have to do is ask, and I will bring you everything that you need."

Moonlit couldn't help but smile. Cloud was so different than she had always thought he was. Everyone saw him one way, but Moonlit knew better. He wasn't the closed-off king that he always purported himself as. It was refreshing in one way, hard to focus on in another way. Moonlit knew that there was something between them, but the better he treated her, the harder it was for her to refuse what was really going on between them.

Once he was in and the door was closed, Moonlit asked him if he needed anything else.

“I need you,” Cloud said simply. Another shock was how straightforward he was, though that had always been rumored to be the case.

“It might have already stuck. Don’t you want to give it some time to see?”

Cloud frowned with the suggestion. “I don’t want to wait. I need you now.”

Moonlit started to say something about his wife or a myriad of other comments that could be said then, but she kept them to herself. Moonlit didn’t honestly care why he was there. She needed him too. While she processed his words, Cloud was moving closer, pulling her into his arms and making Moonlit melt against his hard body. After what he had done to her the night before, Moonlit didn’t think she would be able to tell him no again. When he kissed her, Moonlit knew for sure that she would never deny the man anything that he wanted.

When he pulled her down on top of him on the bed, Moonlit was confused for a time, but quickly picked up on what she was supposed to be doing, and it wasn’t long at all before Moonlit was riding him clumsily. Cloud didn’t let her stay in control very long before he was jerking upward inside of her, making her scream out his name in the most delicious way.

She thought he was done. They laid down together for a time, but he started in again, taking her from behind her and making her body call out a few more times. Moonlit passed out not too long after that, waking up alone but not lonely. Cloud had many things to do. He couldn’t be there with her all the time, but Moonlit missed him when he was gone. She thought about him all day, wondering if he would come see her. She wanted him to, Moonlit knew that much. She

really wanted him to come back, but instead, Moonlit got a visit from Mia.

Mia talked about everything but what was going on between her and her husband. She asked if she was happy, if she needed anything, but Moonlit was content. It was not the situation she had ever thought to find herself in, but she was safe, and she was well cared for. Moonlit almost mentioned Cloud's visit, but she wasn't sure what Mia did and didn't know. Was it just their secret or did his mate know all? Moonlit wasn't sure which way she wanted that to go.

# Chapter 14

Cloud

**Four Months Later…**

"Are you going to see her?" Mia asked blandly. They both knew where he was going. They'd talked about it, and Mia was asking about dinner more than because she actually cared.

"Yeah, just for a little while. I will see you in a few."

Mia agreed but something was off, and Cloud asked her what was going on.

"Just a headache, it's nothing really. I want you to tell her hello for me. I wasn't able to make it up there this week. I don't want her to think that we have forgotten about her."

Cloud said that he would, leaning down and kissing Mia softly. She had been having a lot of headaches lately and he worried about what they were and what it was all about. He wanted to say that everything was fine, listen to his mate, but he knew that it wasn't. He'd caught the healer there a few times, always coming for 'check-ups' that he knew was more. Mia didn't want to talk about it, so Cloud had to show the same worry and not say a word either.

"Are you sure that you're okay?"

Mia smiled and nodded. "She was the one, you were right. I don't know how you knew, but Moonlit was always the one to do this, to be there for you."

Cloud sighed. "She was the right one for us, for our children."

“Children? You are already planning more?”

Cloud hadn’t thought about it, but he agreed. “I want the house full of them.”

“You will be a great dad,” Mia agreed. She was tired she said, reminding him that it was always Moonlit. She told him that she would see him later, though Cloud looked back once, having a hard feeling in his heart. Something was off, but he’d promised Moonlit he’d help her with moving some things. She was showing, a child growing, and Cloud wanted to be there for her. He also wanted other things, making love to Moonlit had become a daily occurrence. They never really talked about it and the one time he’d tried, Moonlit had just shut him up with her actions instead. Moonlit didn’t want to talk about the future or what they were doing. He was the enemy, even if he was doing everything to not be.

When he got to Moonlit’s, she was worried about some rumor that she had heard about an attack. She worried for her people on the outside of the wall, as well as her own life. While Cloud tried to tell her that everything was okay, it was hard for her to believe it. She wanted to know that they were safe, and Cloud agreed to show her proof of her safety. Moonlit hadn’t known about the place he took her, and she was impressed and also relieved.

Since Moonlit, he’d spent some of his time with her, but the rest of it was given to warring for more lands for his people and building bigger and better weapons for his army in the lab. Moonlit and Mia were bright spots but bringing Moonlit to the lab was helpful. Moonlit was calmed because she wasn’t worried about future attacks, and he got to show her around. He didn’t introduce her to anyone, and he made her wear a lab coat, but Moonlit seemed pleased to get out and about.

Cloud was delighted to see her interest. She had so many questions and he just chocked it up to the fact that she was really invested on being safe. Cloud had promised safety to her, and he didn’t want her to worry about anything.

By the time they got out of there, it was a couple of hours later and they went back to her place. Their sanctuary was just what the two of them needed, no matter how badly the two of them made no sense. Cloud didn't think he would be able to give her up, even after the time for the need for her was past. Cloud didn't think that time for him would ever come. For four months now, he'd been with her every night, and nothing had changed. Each time, the desire was still the same as the last time. Cloud just wanted her more, if that was possible.

Cloud made love to her extra slow, worried that if he got too worked up he would hurt her. She was carrying his child, their child, and he could never look at her the same way again. She would always be this mystical creature that had come into his life and changed everything.

Moonlit let it slip that she loved him. It was the first time that she had said it and Cloud held her even more tenderly when it was over. He wanted to talk about it, ask her if she meant it, but he knew that it would only complicate the situation even further. He knew what was going on between him and Moonlit was impossible. It wasn't even that he was mated with another woman. It was so much more than that. It was who she was, who he was, it could never work out. While he wanted to believe that there was a way that they could be together, he knew that there wasn't, and it was just a pipe dream.

That night as he walked home, Cloud was on cloud nine. He was finally going to have the heir that he needed to get everyone in the elder council and his parents and uncles off his back. Cloud knew that they weren't worried about much else than their own legacy carrying on. If leadership changed from their family, Cloud knew that they wouldn't be as revered as they were. Cloud never cared about such things, but the legacy of the clan and everything they had worked for was all that his dad and uncles talked about. It was obviously all they cared about.

While he wanted to believe that there was more to all their concern, Cloud knew better. So, for all intents and purposes, he was

on top of the world, and he was finally doing everything that they wanted him to do, so he should have been happy. But Cloud thought about those people on the outside of the walls and the freedom that they so openly had. If he had it so good, why did he look to them with envy?

By the time he got home, Cloud was lost in thought and didn't pick up on anything different or strange. Later, he would feel guilt for not knowing exactly when he walked in what he was going to find. Instead, he made a drink in the kitchen, looked for leftovers because he was starving, and called to Mia to see if she wanted anything. It was all so normal, until the moment that it wasn't.

Cloud walked into the bedroom still talking, waiting for Mia to answer him, but then he saw her on the bed, the color of her face ashen, and he knew that she was never going to speak to him again. She was never going to speak to anyone again.

He went to his dead wife's body and held her for several moments, trying to make sense of it all, but knowing deep down what he had known. Mia had been sick for some time. He wasn't quite sure what it was, but he would find out soon enough. She'd wanted to pretend that she was well, she didn't want people to feel sorry for her or to pity her. Cloud had known something was wrong, but he'd also known that Mia wanted to pretend like all was well, and who was he to go against that? Who was he to force her to try every treatment, no matter how grotesque it was, just for a few more days or weeks with him?

He sat for quite some time, his inside strained of feeling and Cloud knew that he should call someone. He should have started notifying relatives. There was so much that he needed to do, but all he wanted to do was go back to Moonlit and crawl into bed next to her. He had never done that before, but for the first time he couldn't be alone. For the first time in years, he was finally alone, Mia having always been by his side. Mia was gone now, and Cloud needed someone to lean on. Moonlit was the one. Wasn't that what his wife had said?

She said nothing as he came in, the key to her door already given to him. All Moonlit did when he slid into bed was move in a little bit closer to share the blanket. He held her hand and there were several times that tears quickly fell from his eyes. No sound was made, but the pain of losing Mia was almost too much to bear. They had been through so much together. Mia knew him inside and out and still accepted him. Where would he ever find that?

Before they went to sleep, Moonlit asked him if he was alright. Cloud lied to her and said that he was fine. She didn't believe him, but she didn't press it either. Cloud was thankful for that.

# Chapter 15

Moonlit

**Five months later…**

The baby was supposed to come soon, and Moonlit should have been excited. She was in a way, but in another she was nervous. Everything was changing and Moonlit didn't know what was going to happen with her and Cloud. The time of year where the mates were found in ceremonies was upon them and soon Cloud would have to find another mate. That was all Moonlit could think about while she felt her body going into labor. She wasn't worried about the pain that was supposed to come with it, or the relief of finally having the little person out of her. Moonlit instead thought about a million questions of what the future would hold and a million fears of what could happen.

Moonlit should have sent for Cloud, but she needed some time alone. The baby was coming, but she knew that it wasn’t going to happen immediately. She kept telling herself that she had time, even if it felt like it was all happening right then and there. It wasn't like she could go anywhere anyway; nobody could know that she was pregnant. There were lies being said about how the baby came to be and part of it started with the fact that nobody knew that Mia had died already. The story was that she was having a rough pregnancy, so she had been on bed rest. The story would be that she would die in labor. It was a way for Cloud to control the narrative, which was very important to him. Considering how far he’d gone to get his heir, Moonlit completely respected it. She didn't know how any of it was going to work in the future, but there was nothing like bringing a child into the world that was going to change everything, to make her start thinking about it.

The contractions started getting closer together and Moonlit yearned for someone to be there with her. She had brought it up when she and Cloud had talked about it, but he was planning on helping her. That is, if he even made it in time.

Moonlit worried that maybe he wouldn’t and she would have to do it all by herself. She reminded herself that it happened all the time, but it still did not take away the fear that crept up inside of her over it.

The contractions were mere minutes apart when she heard the front door open, and she could finally breathe again. Moonlit hated to admit how badly she needed him, but the relief really did speak for itself. He took one look at her and he started to get nervous as well.

“It’s time, isn't it?”

Moonlit agreed and for a man who was usually so cool, calm, and collected, Cloud was a literal mess. Sadly, he was handling it better than her at the moment. He had a smile on his face, and it was as maddening as it was wonderful. Moonlit didn't know what to think about any of it. She was having a hard time with what came next.

“You look scared,” Cloud commented.

Moonlit admitted that she was scared, and he told her that everything was going to be fine. “That sounds like something that people tell someone when they want them to stop freaking out.”

“To be fair, you are freaking out.”

Moonlit rolled her eyes. “I'm just nervous. What if something happens?”

Cloud touched her face gently and told her that everything was going to be fine. “How do you know?” she insisted.

Cloud just smiled and told her that he just knew.

Moonlit wasn’t taking that as he wanted her to. She didn’t feel any better. “You’ve really got to work on your pep talk.”

“Fine, I’ll work on it for next time. This time it looks like you're ready to go.”

Moonlit couldn’t believe that it was finally happening. Of course, she knew about it and thought about it, and dreaded it. It was finally happening. She was finally going to meet their baby that she had been carrying all that time and bonding with.

When it first happened, it was all for Mia, but now Mia wasn't even alive, so there was no mother to hand her child off to. Sad thing was she had literally no idea what was going to happen next. Would she get to see her baby? Take care of it? There was a lot that she and Cloud had talked about, but there was just as much that were now questions in her mind. Moonlit wanted nothing more than to finally get the answers, even if she was scared to death of what those answers would be.

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“Are you ready to hold him?”

Moonlit smiled. “It's a boy?”

Cloud agreed, his face glowing with pure pleasure. Moonlit had always thought him a beautiful man, but in that instant, he was absolutely breathtaking. She tried to focus on something else, but he was there to see.

“I take it you're happy that it's a boy.”

Cloud nodded, but quickly said that if the next one was a girl, he would be okay with that too.

Moonlit paused, wondering if she had heard him right. The next one?

Cloud laughed at her reaction. “Too soon?”

She wholeheartedly agreed that it was. Moonlit was just physically getting over having his first kid. She certainly wasn't thinking about having another one. Cloud seemed quite determined that she should get it in her mind about the next one. Moonlit really didn't know how to feel about it. She was still trying to make sense of it all.

“How is this going to work?” she asked.

Cloud looked at her confused. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, how is this going to work?” she repeated herself.

Cloud got serious. “Everyone is going to think that this is Mia’s baby and that she died in childbirth. We’ve already talked about it.”

Moonlit agreed that they had talked about some things, but she wanted to know the logistics of day-to-day life, not what was going to happen between them. She wasn't even focused on that anymore. Her mind was on the beautiful child that she was holding. It was her child just as much as it was Cloud’s, more so, or so she thought, because she had carried him inside of her for so long. Moonlit was really asking without asking if she was still going to be in the child's life. Now that she knew he wouldn't have a mother, it was harder for her to say that she could just walk away. The idea of that was now possible.

“Will I get to see him?”

Cloud looked at her surprised. “Of course you will, you’re his mother.”

“How am I going to see him? Are you going to bring him here?”

He looked like he hadn’t even thought about it, and she worried that he really hadn't. Cloud was prepared about most things, but

other things he just truly did not concern himself with. It wasn't something done maliciously or on purpose, he just didn't think about it.

“You are going to have to stay in the castle,” he finally responded.

“The castle? That wasn't the agreement. The agreement was that I got to stay here.”

“Someone is going to have to take care of him, and I would imagine that you want to. I wouldn't want anybody else to take care of our son, other than his mother.”

Moonlit melted with his words. That's all she wanted to hear honestly. She wanted the acknowledgment that it was their son and she just needed to know that she would be able to see him. The idea of not getting to see him was torture.

She’d worried that Cloud would change with the baby. He’d have his heir, what he really wanted in the grand scheme of things. She’d been afraid that he was going to forget everything they had together. She knew that he still might, but Moonlit was at least going to have some time before she was cast aside. Moonlit was sure that she would be.

“Do you think you can do that?” he asked her lightly, kissing her and telling her how beautiful she was. Their son was exhausted and after a while, she gave him to his father and tried to take a nap.

Moonlit went to sleep with relief and a smile on her face. Dennis was born, and he was healthy. If only she could hold onto that happiness a little bit longer.

# Chapter 16

Cloud

Cloud was more than happy to move Moonlit into the castle. He had been sneaking out to be with her for months and all he wanted to do was be with her and not have to go up and down the mountain. Even his wolf was tired when he got back.

Moonlit was a little bit harder to convince that the move was a good thing. She enjoyed her solitude at the cabin, and she liked being by herself more often than not. Moonlit worried about how others were going to treat her, but Cloud was not worried about that. He knew that he was going to make it clear to anybody who would listen, that Moonlit was off-limits for ridicule or anything else. She was going to be taking care of his son, they didn't need to know that she was the real mother. Nobody needed to know anything, except that Moonlit was not to be messed with. He told her time and again that she would be safe, and people would leave her alone. No one had done anything to make her think otherwise, but Cloud could see her point.

Throughout her entire pregnancy, Cloud had gone to see her every single day. When Mia had died, he had gone to see her even more, feeling better in her arms just because Moonlit took away some of the sadness that felt insurmountable some mornings.

He had learned what it was like to be an out-waller from her perspective, and it felt damning to hear what his people were going through. Whatever had happened so long ago that had made it customary to treat certain clans as lesser than, no longer should be the reason to continue punishing them. Cloud wanted to make immediate changes, but he wasn't stupid. He knew that it had been part of their consciousness for generations.

Equality was going to happen. He had decided not too long ago that he would be the one to make it happen, but he also knew that it had to go slower than he would probably like. If not, there would be resistance and possibly even a rebellion. Cloud worried how it would all end. Cloud was trying to leave a clan and a legacy to his son. It would do him no good if he burned it to the ground before Dennis came of age to take it over.

Cloud had been taking off too much time and even though he had decided to cut down on the number of raids that his people did, he no longer tried to push the boundaries of his kingdom. Cloud still had to show force in some areas to keep what he already had. He wasn't going to fight to take anymore, even though he knew he could grow the kingdom. Cloud was interested in taking care of the people he already had, all of the people.

He had to show his face every once in a while. People needed to see him alive and well, even though he had just lost his mate. Cloud knew he was going to be regarded with condolences, which were easier to take now that he had had months to grieve Mia’s passing. If it had just happened, Cloud would not have responded in the same way. His father was one of the first people he saw, already talking to the elders, likely trying to push for more war. It wasn't Cloud who wanted to constantly be at war, it was his father and uncles.

“Is there not even a congratulation and condolence in order before we move on to the next prong of your legacy, father?”

Battle Star looked like he was guilty of something, but Cloud knew that he did not feel that emotion at all. He doubted that his father ever felt guilt, always so sure of himself and the trajectory that he was going in. Cloud was not that lucky. He had many things that he second-guessed. He wished that he was as sure as Battle Star, especially when there were so many people following him. He could not muster that sort of confidence though.

“I hear that we are not pushing to the west any longer. You had the Blue Collers on the run and I'm trying to figure out why you

stopped. Nobody seems to have an answer," Battle Star started in.

Cloud could feel eyes on him, and he looked around at the elder shifters in the room. It wasn't the first time that his father had called out one of his decisions in front of everyone, but it was no less frustrating when he did it again.

"It came to my attention that maybe we are stretching ourselves too thin. What is the use of all this territory, if so many of our kind live in appalling conditions?" Cloud countered. It was something that had been on his mind for a while, Moonlit helping him to see the injustice of it all. More honestly, she made him look and actually see it, instead of ignoring it and pretending like it wasn't happening.

Since Cloud already had all the attention, more was coming his way with such a statement. He saw the knee-jerk reaction that he was wrong and there were no such people living that way amongst them. Cloud waited for the noise to die down before he said one word that shut everyone up.

"Out-wallers."

His dad was the first to recover, sputtering that while they were technically part of the clan, they did not share the same benefits as everyone else for a reason. That upset Cloud because he had been replaying the conversation in his head, the one he was having right then and there, and he knew that something similar would be said. His frustration and sadness came from the fact that it was his father who said it. In his mind, it wasn't his father that he had to face off with, though Cloud knew that it wasn't hard to imagine.

"No, father, they are part of the clan, and we should no longer be punishing them for their ancestors' deeds. It's time to bring all of our people back into the clan. We need to take care of all of them, make sure that everybody has what they need, before we take more territory from the other shifters. We are big enough. Now we need to get stronger, not by territory and reputation, but by raising up the lesser out-wallers who we have persecuted for far too long."

There was silence after Cloud’s short speech. When the shock wore off, everyone had an opinion, and it was apparent that they were all going to say it at the same time. Cloud had to yell over the noise, telling them to shut up and to listen. He knew that most of his new understanding had come from Moonlit, but it didn't matter. He couldn't go in the same way he had been going. It was time for a change, and whether he had ulterior motives didn't matter at the end of the day. It was the right thing to do.

He fielded a few questions and most of the men in attendance wanted to know what had changed and what made him think that it was time after all these years to bring the out-wallers back into the fold. People didn't like change. Cloud had known from the start that he was going to have a hell of a time convincing people. If his elders and his own father were any indication, he was right to worry about the difficulties he would face.

That got most of the people talking to each other and Cloud wondered how long it would take to help them see what Moonlit had showed him. It wasn’t all negative and that got his father a little upset. Cloud couldn’t help smiling about it all. Battle Star could feel his power slipping and for the first time, Cloud thought it was a good thing. His father’s way had gone on too long and there were many things that Cloud was ready to change for good. He knew it was going to be tough on certain clan members, his family being one of them, but it had to be done.

At the end of the meeting, he had several people who wanted to talk to him, but he didn’t hang around long. Cloud sent most of the other ones away, not wanting to hear the negativity that he knew was coming. He was going to get enough of it from Battle Star and when he spoke to the old Alpha, his dad wanted to talk about a battle that Cloud had no desire to fight. Battle Star wasn’t listening, he never did.

The conversation went back and forth, not going anywhere, before Cloud realized that he didn’t have to wait until nightfall to sneak and see Moonlit. She was back in his bed, waiting for him.

That was probably the best part of his day, putting a smile on his face to think of it.

He pushed the meeting, the talk of battle and war out of his mind. It was usually all he thought about, the only thing that mattered. He was the good child that did his father and uncles' bidding. He had, up until that point. The whole time Cloud was talking about radical ideas like releasing slaves and old enemies that hadn't done anything in a very long time, Cloud could see his father's anger rising. Then, he was plotting and left in anger when Cloud didn't agree. So many things were changing.

The fact that Cloud needed to remarry was brought up and shut down as well. As much as he wanted to get rid of the thoughts of the day, he knew that there was something there to worry about. He would have to remarry, and fate would pick for him. Cloud could guarantee that it wouldn't be Moonlit's name called and even if it was, she wouldn't be there, because out-wallers didn't come to such things. They wanted to get married for love, an idea that was so foreign to Cloud and his people.

Dennis was sleeping when he got home, and it gave him a chance to spend some time with Moonlit before he woke up. She was tired and when he did wake up, Cloud suggested that she get some sleep, then he would take care of him until he went back to sleep. Cloud watched her sleep for a time, wondering how they could be together when everything was rooting against them. He was willing to put everything on the line for her, to make her his, but he had to wonder, worry even, would it be enough?

# Chapter 17

Moonlit

**One year later…**

Dennis was asleep and Moonlit had exactly an hour or so procure the goods that she had been waiting to be made and to get them to her safe house. Moonlit was paid generously for her duties of taking care of the next heir to the Royal clan, and she had no expenses as Cloud paid for her every need and bought her anything that she could think of. Moonlit spent the majority of her money on one thing and one thing only. She spent it to help free her people.

Sadly, for the first six months of the year, Moonlit had lived in some kind of bliss, forgetting all about the suffering of the people that she knew and loved. It was finding out that Oleander had been attacked and nothing was being done about it that reminded her. Oleander was married and her husband had sworn to find the culprit and get his revenge, but it was thought to be a Royal and his revenge would not be given. He would be expected to deal with it, Oleander was broken, and it made Moonlit realize that just because she was having a better time of it, didn't mean that everything that she had fought for in the beginning was not still happening. She just couldn't see it any longer.

That put her into action to find a place and start stacking it with weapons. She knew what was going to happen. She saw what Cloud was coming up with to keep his kingdom safe. He wasn't expanding, but he was patrolling his areas more intently than before. There was talk of the out-wallers becoming regular citizens, but the pushback was palpable every time she was out in public. Moonlit was the mother of the next heir, but she was treated just as badly as before, maybe even more so now because she was around them all the

time. Some people looked at her like it was her fault that the changes were coming to pass. If they knew the truth, they would hate her even more. With all the hate, Moonlit wished that there was something good to come out of it. She knew that even though she loved Cloud, the real reason that she'd been given the opportunity to be by his side was so that she could free her people. She was in the best position to do so.

The shipment was in on time and the large warehouse that she rented was coming together nicely. It wouldn't be long before they had the weapons needed for a push back. Moonlit didn't want to take anything over, she was rallying everybody together to make a stand. They had unsuccessfully tried to stage strikes and walkouts but when the people they were striking against could put them in a dungeon or kill them on the spot, that method was quickly abandoned.

At some point, Moonlit had known that the only way forward was war. The fact that she would be waring against her son's kingdom and her son's father that she loved was not lost on Moonlit. It was the price that she had to pay, choosing one life or the other. Moonlit knew that her son and Cloud would be okay no matter what happened, but Oleander and the other people she knew might not be. There was a rebellion already started in the minds and hearts of half the out-wallers. Moonlit hoped that if she could control the narrative and the army behind her, she would be able to minimize the pain and suffering for all. That's what Moonlit hoped anyway.

She worried about Cloud finding out and taking her actions as some kind of betrayal. While she knew that she was going to have to go to war with him, it wasn't like she wanted to. The truth was that it was a necessary evil. It didn't change the way she felt about him, it just made it more complicated. They were already complicated enough. Lies bound them together and deeds that neither one of them wanted to come to light. They had kept the death of the queen under wraps for months, lied about the new heir, and who the mother was. They were certainly not above chastisement.

Moonlit talked to a few people who were there taking inventory. Not many people knew about the warehouse, but enough to take care of things while she was away. Moonlit was at the castle most days and it was only about once a week that she was able to get away and check on the progress of everything. The more weapons stacked, the more nervous Moonlit became. What she was doing was treason. Cloud could kill her for it, and nobody would bat an eye. At the moment, they would probably cheer on her death. It was a sobering thought and Moonlit didn't spend much time dilly-dallying. She had to make sure she wasn't caught going in or out. No one could know about the warehouse until it was time. Moonlit was still waiting for the time, not sure how it would arrive or what it would bring but knowing that it would change everything.

She went back to the master rooms at the castle, ignoring the dirty looks she got along the way and also ignoring just as much the preparations that were underway for the mating ceremonies. Everyone in the clan that was eligible would find their mate, the elders would speak to the ancestors, and a name would be given.

Other times, people were physically brought together. One way or another, fate would bring together the matches and by the end of the night, there would be up to one hundred people who were mated. It was a huge deal, and the castle was buzzing with excitement. It was far less special when it came to her people. Their rituals were simple. They fell in love, and they got married whenever they decided it was right. There was no special ceremony to have fate bring them together. Even in that way they had to take the more dangerous route. They had to live on chance, something that was far harder to deal with. They had to hope that they knew better than fate, which was what Moonlit wanted. She knew that Royals never matched with out-wallers, not in hundreds of years. It wasn't going to change though, and everything that they had been building together would soon be gone.

She was holding Dennis and feeding him, rocking and singing to him when Cloud came in. He had a look of lust on his face and

Moonlit tried to wave him off. She couldn't believe that he got turned on by such things but knew that it was because the connection they had was so strong. They had talked about another child, but Moonlit was secretly taking herbal supplements to stop it from happening. She had too much on her plate and she couldn't wage a war when she was pregnant. It was bad enough that she had a young child, their son only a year old, but she figured that he would be about two before the resistance was ready. One more year of oppression, then they would finally be free. The last thing she needed was to be strapped with another child or pregnant at the time of the war's commencement.

Moonlit had been told that Dennis had quite a day, so it was no surprise when he nodded off not too long after that. Cloud was back early, and she asked him how his day was. He had a scowl on his face, and she could have guessed quite accurately that his father and someone else in the elder council had frustrated him to no end. Cloud was always upset about one thing or another and while Moonlit wanted to make things better, she also wanted to learn what was going on so that it would help her own cause. She had an inside scoop to the enemy, and Moonlit wasn’t above using it to her advantage. Anything to further her people’s cause. Moonlit’s position and closeness to the king was a gift that she wasn’t going to waste.

He started to kiss her, and Moonlit was quickly thrown into another storm altogether. She still found it impossible to refuse Cloud, crazier still was that she didn't want to. He knew just what to do to make everything better and that evening was no different. Moonlit had her mind on everything that came next, with very little thought put into what came after war. It scared her to think about it, which was probably why she tried so hard not to. Cloud’s touch made it quite easy to just be in the moment and forget about everything that was going wrong. She could worry about that another day.

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Later on that evening, the couple talked about their day and Cloud told her how he worried about what was coming next. Cloud had been trying to free her people. There had been meetings and all sorts of talk about if her kind was as good as the rest of them, but after almost a year, they still had not decided one way or another. It was disheartening that it was a debate to begin with. Moonlit knew that Cloud was trying to do the right thing, but she also knew that he couldn't do it alone. He wasn't the only one who had to make those decisions. It felt like he was the only one though.

Moonlit tried not to lose faith, but it was easy to do so. She felt like things were never going to get better. The more Cloud talked about it, she could sense his own frustration and wished more than anything that there was a way for them to make it work without going to the extent that Moonlit knew she was going to have to. It didn't have to be so complicated.

Cloud must have seen the aggravation on her face and told her that they were going to figure it out one way or another. Moonlit agreed with the sentiment, though she secretly knew that her one way or another might be far different than his. Moonlit wasn't going to give up because she was going to take matters into her own hands. It was a shame, because even though Moonlit knew he was trying, it wasn't enough. She didn't want it bad enough. She could tell that Cloud's sympathy was stronger and he wanted to care. Sometimes he just didn't care enough because he had never been put in the same situation. He couldn't understand it and as much as she would try to help him to understand her people's position, it was something that just couldn't be learned.

Moonlit commented that she had a headache and told Cloud that they would talk about it later. She didn't want to but knew that they would have to eventually. One day soon, Moonlit was going to go to war against the man that held her so gently. It was hard to even fathom but knowing that it was going to happen, she tried to distance herself. How could she distance herself from him? Why would she ever want to?

She stayed up thinking about the warehouse and thinking about what was to come. Moonlit hoped that they would be able to figure out something. She knew that trying to forget about Cloud though was a waste of time. Moonlit was never going to stop having feelings for him. She didn't just care about him, she loved him. She hated to think about what he was going to do when he found out about her betrayal. It was exactly what it was going to be to him. He was going to take it as a betrayal and, of course, she couldn't even blame him. Cloud had done a lot for her, but Moonlit had to tell him that it wasn’t enough. It wouldn’t be enough until her people were all free.

# Chapter 18

Cloud

Cloud was getting increasingly worried about the upcoming ceremony and festivities. He knew what was expected of him. He was to find a new mate so that he could have more heirs, just in case. It really was just a breeding program at that point. The problem was that a new wife would complicate everything further. It wasn't like he could have Moonlit, the woman he wanted. Instead, he would have to let fate take a crack at it and possibly lose everything that he currently had going for him.

He most certainly was going to lose Moonlit. She wasn't going to share, and he didn't blame her, because there was no way that he would be able to. The reprieve that they had together, the easiness, would be gone. Everything that made them special would no longer exist. His new wife would want to take care of his son, and Dennis' mother was not going to be happy about that. No way he looked at it could it come out for the better. It was all crashing in on top of him, and he looked up and saw it coming.

The meetings about relaxing some of the rules on the out-wallers were going far worse than he could have imagined. He had thought that with a little time and thought, everybody with a heart would see that there was no need to punish them forever. That was what he had wanted to believe, so sure he was in his people doing the right thing. He couldn't even get the elders to listen, which were supposed to have the wisdom for the whole clan, to see it his way. It had been done that way for too long. Cloud didn't see how it was going to change.

Cloud was not usually drawn to mysticism, even though he knew magic ran in his own veins and in everyone around him. He tried to

keep things as simple as possible, and magic had a way of making everything more difficult. He needed answers though. It was just that simple. Cloud was willing to go out of the gates by himself and after shifting into his true form, he ran off in the direction of the seer. He hoped for some kind of resolution to his problem, even though at the moment it felt impossible.

He couldn't believe it. Cloud had to believe that there was another way, even if it didn't present itself right away. For one reason or another, he was convinced that he would get everything that he needed from the seer. In truth, he just wanted a way to stay with Moonlit. She was supposed to be his; he was her first and would be her last. Whatever he had to do to make that happen, Cloud was convinced that he would because it would be worth it.

When he got to the blind warlock's house on the edge of his territory, Cloud shifted back to his human form and heard Malachi tell him to come in before he had even raised his hand to knock on the door. The seer knew all, or he had really good hearing.

Cloud opened the door and was greeted by name. The seer had a grotesque face, but it didn't matter to him because he couldn't see it. Someone long ago when he was young had burned his eyes out from one transgression or another. The story went that it was his father having a mental break who had attacked his son, thinking that he was a demon. The seer was old now, his eyes had not seen in decades. He had killed his father blinded and in doing so, made himself a legend.

Cloud was not afraid of Malachi, but he respected him and made sure that he never came to harm. The seer was an out-waller, but Cloud would never let anything happen to him. The seer had guided Cloud many times before and he hoped that he would be able to this time. Cloud had never had so many questions that needed answers before.

The seer smiled and Cloud almost looked away at the sight. “I was wondering when you were going to come.”

Cloud sighed, knowing that his head would hurt before he left. The seer liked to talk in circles, and Cloud was sure that it was to purposely drive him crazy. What else could it be? “I'm hoping that we can speak clearly this time.”

The seer smiled. “We speak clearly every time, it just takes you longer to understand it. It's not my fault that you're dense.”

Cloud grinned at him and his unseen eyes and knew that the smile was wasted on him, but he couldn't help it anyway. Cloud sat down and waited for Malachi to do the same thing. It was then that he realized that he didn't actually even know his full name. Maybe a man like him didn't need a whole name after a while. It was easier just to call him by what he was and what he would always be.

“What can I do for you, Alpha?”

Cloud groaned inwardly. “I need answers.”

“Yes, you need answers about the woman, the mother of your child.”

If it was anybody else saying such a thing, Cloud would be alarmed. He knew that Mia was not the mother, which wasn’t a huge deal, but it would be proof that he lied to his people and that was something that he never wanted proven. He still felt guilty about it.

“If you know why I am here, Seer, why do you always play these games with me?” Cloud wondered.

“It is hard to entertain oneself out here alone,” Malachi countered.

“Come to the gates, you can live inside the gates,” Cloud repeated his offer.

The seer waved him off, telling him that he didn’t want the out-wallers inside the gates. “It's not right that I am held above the rest because of how I look and what I do. We are all out-wallers.”

Cloud sighed and told the seer that he was trying to make things right.

“Ah, but you're not trying hard enough, are you? I am still here and the woman you love is still in hiding. It doesn’t sound like you are making things right at all.”

Cloud agreed with the sentiment, even if he didn't want to hear it out loud. He was failing miserably, even though he was trying. No one wanted to hear that, and no one wanted to accept out-wallers as part of the clan. Cloud had known that there was going to be some push back against it, but he hadn’t prepared enough for it.

“That's why I'm here. I need your help,” Cloud said, hating to admit that he needed help at all.

Malachi grinned and waited. When Cloud couldn’t get it out, he asked again. “What do you need my help with?”

“You know what I need your help with, seer. I need you to help me get these damn people to accept her. If not, I'm going to get paired up with some other woman and I don't want that. Mia was supposed to be mine; I don't know how they got it right, but I worry that they're not going to get it right when it comes to Moonlit. I don't want to be paired up with somebody else. Tell me how I can stop that from happening.”

“You will be paired up with the right person. The ancestors will pick the right one, as they always do.” The seer spoke like everyone else who said anything to his fears. It wasn’t a good enough answer for Cloud. He needed specifics. He needed to know what was going on.

“Is it Moonlit? What if I don't give a shit if it’s right and it’s not her?”

“Many of our kind believe in reincarnation, did you know that?” the seer asked.

Cloud knew the stories just like everyone else, but he wasn't there for a story. He was there for answers. He said as much to him, but he was not given the choice. He was told to sit down and shut up basically, the seer in front of him the only person who would ever dream of talking to him like that. He was another out-waller who didn't know his place, Cloud thought with a smile, thinking of the out-waller who had made him fall in love again, even though he hadn't even thought it was possible.

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“Many years ago, two lovers met in the worst time. There was a fight in the shifter community, two leaders, but both wanted to run it all. It was then that the first and only shifter war took place, claiming the lives of half the living shifters on the planet. It raged on for years, and the only way it finally ended was when one of the leaders was killed.

“Others tried to take up the fight, but no one could bear the viciousness that the war had brought out in all the people.” Cloud had heard the story before. He’d heard about the fight and the love for the daughter of the enemy, which had changed the course of his trajectory. Cloud had heard it all, but what did it all mean in the current context?

“Everyone knows the story. What does that have to do with me?”

“What if I told you that you were the leader that won? I know we like to think of it as your great-grandfather, but what if I told you that it was actually you, a reincarnated version of yourself?” the seer inquired.

Cloud now found himself questioning his sanity and honestly not believing him. He never had a reason to not to before, but this was different. Obviously, Malachi did not know what he spoke of. There was no way...

“The best thing for you to do is to just accept it. It will make it easier. The next thing you need to do is find the Book of Kings. It will have what you need. It will have illustrations of you and Moonlit, with a likeness close enough that it will be hard to debate. If you want proof, all you have to do is look for it. Find the book, seek out the scar on Moonlit’s shoulder, and you will have your proof. You need to also go to the matching ceremony, which will be your final line of defense. Once people see how that goes, really nothing else will matter. Get the book, find the scar, go to the ceremony at the gates, and Moonlit will be your lover once more.”

“Once more, so she was mine in the past?” Cloud asked.

Malachi sighed, like he was tired of explaining himself. Wouldn’t be the first time that Cloud had annoyed him. Cloud wasn't trying to be dense; he was just trying to understand the unexplainable. “If you’re right, I cannot thank you enough.”

“If I'm right? If I was wrong, why would you come here?”

“Don’t take offense.”

“I won’t, but one day soon, all of my kind are going to be on the other side of that wall, so treat us well,” the seer cautioned.

“Are you saying they are going to rise up?”

The seer shrugged. “Either that or you are going to back down. Both scenarios seem impossible.”

Cloud got answers, but it became quite impossible to understand anything. Malachi talked in circles, and he left frustrated, but at least now he had direction. There were several books that mentioned the two lovers that started the Great War with his people. Everyone learned about it from a young age. It was the reason that the society was the way it was, and all children asked why the out-wallers never got to come in. They're always directed back to the story of ill-fated love and the need for everything to be chosen for them. Love’s

freedom was taken away because it was merely used as an excuse to what could happen if they were meant to choose whoever they wanted to.

He asked the seer one last thing before he left. He wanted to know how he could make the ceremony go the way he wanted. Was there anything he had to do?

Malachi smiled at him. “Now you are asking the right questions. You need to do the ceremony between the threshold of the wall. It’s very important. Right there in the middle, and everyone needs to be invited. You and Moonlit will not be the only ones who will be mated against customs. The ceremony is going to change everything.”

# Chapter 19

Moonlit

As it got closer to the time of the ceremony, Moonlit was moving twice as fast to get everything in place. She was going to lose her position in the kingdom. She was going to lose everything, and while Moonlit was devastated that she was going to lose the man she loved, she also knew that freeing her people would be a balm to her soul. At least she would be able to make someone else's life better, even if she couldn't do it for herself.

Cloud was gone for the week leading up to the ceremony and that made Moonlit fear the worst. What other reason would he have for completely disavowing her? She had done nothing wrong. Moonlit wanted to think that it was all going to be okay, and she was looking into it wrong, but not having him next to her was all the proof she needed.

Moonlit was convinced that she was about to lose everything like living behind the walls, but it was not what she was going to miss. She was going to miss Cloud and the connection that they had together. More than that, Moonlit was going to miss her son. She had no idea how that was all going to work itself out. She'd always known that she was going to have to give Dennis up. Mia dying had changed things for quite some time, but now she wondered what was supposed to happen next.

There was a small part of her that wanted to give up on everyone except her and her son. She wanted to take Dennis and run as far and as fast as she could. She would tell nobody; she would bring nobody, just her son and her. All the bombs, guns, and other

weapons that she had been amassing didn't matter; she would just as easily leave it behind so she could take her son with her.

Moonlit had to stick to the plan though. She had to remind herself repeatedly that she wasn't the only one in a horrible situation. She was actually living better than she had in her whole life, which made her feel guilty in some strange way, and she questioned all the time if the reason she had not succeeded in the two years that she had been there was because of Cloud. He kept her thinking so hard about the future that she could not see what was right in front of her. Moonlit didn't know if he did it on purpose, but she felt like it was impossible for her to focus when he was around. She tried to see his leaving as being a necessary sacrifice, even if it made her feel like she was suffocating.

She was nervous when Cloud got back a couple days early. There had been a large shipment with some larger weapons. They were unsanctioned and there would be no doubt what the purpose of such weapons would be. Cloud would never forgive her if he found out. Everything was happening fast; it was two days before the ceremony and Cloud just popped back up. He was happy about something, even if she didn't know what. He walked around with a big grin on his face. Moonlit hoped that everything could still happen with him there.

She waited until he left, and she went immediately to find Gavin, one of the few people on the inside that was helping her. She wanted to make sure that it went off without a hitch. She wanted to eyeball the equipment, make sure that everything was there. Something was off in the air, and she felt like if she wasn't careful, it was all going to go to crap. That feeling got even worse when Moonlit was sure that she had been followed. The hairs on the back of her neck stood up and even though she went behind herself several times, she could not see who was hiding in the darkness, watching and waiting.

Moonlit tried not to think about it too much. She was just going to obsess about it and knew that thinking would do that. She had known the whole time that there was always a chance of something

awful happening. She had known the danger, back when it was right in front of her, and she felt like she was in the crosshairs. The danger seemed even more palpable.

She got back to the rooms in the castle, knowing that it was going to be different so soon. The life she'd curated at the castle was going to be gone and her real life was going to begin or end. Moonlit really wasn't sure which way it was going to go. She liked to imagine that she knew, but she really had no idea.

Her head was filled with all the possibilities, and Moonlit tried her best to pull her thoughts away from the ceremony and losing Cloud, but all she could think about was losing him.

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Moonlit woke up with a start. She looked over and saw Cloud there at the edge of the bed, watching her sleep. It wasn't the first time that she had seen him react in such a way, though he usually had a smile on his face. This time there was a scowl in its place, and he did not look happy. Neither said anything for several moments. Moonlit felt like she already knew what was happening and she sat up, waiting for him to tell her what she was quite certain she was going to hear.

"We need to talk, Moonlit," Cloud started.

She agreed with the sentiment, and he told her that they had somewhere to go. He didn't say where. Moonlit was shaking inside but did her very best not to show it. She got dressed and followed him outside of the castle. As they wound around behind the gates, there was a clear direction they were going and of course it was the last direction that Moonlit wanted to go.

She tried to start a casual conversation with him, and he basically ignored it. Cloud didn't want small talk. Moonlit was feeling nervous, worried that she'd already lost him. There was a distinct look that she did not appreciate seeing. He no longer trusted her, which

Moonlit knew he had a good reason, of course, but still made her sad to think about.

As they got closer to the warehouse, Moonlit could see smoke billowing up in the direction of where it should be. She looked over at Cloud suddenly and she finally saw that smile, but it was a cold one she'd seen other people get, not her. To see him in such a way made her blood grow cold.

"You know what that is?" Cloud questioned.

Moonlit agreed that she did, and Cloud asked her clearly what the hell was going on. "Seems like you already know. You've made up your mind so you don't need to ask me anything," Moonlit shot back.

Cloud gritted his teeth and told her that he wanted to hear it from her. "If you have betrayed me, the least you can do is say it to my face. I think I deserve at least that much."

Moonlit thought it was pretty rich that he was talking about betrayal. She believed that he had betrayed his own people, her people, then she put it back at him.

"So, is this what it has always been about? Revenge?"

Moonlit wanted to argue back, say that it had always been about revenge, and she'd never felt anything for him, but of course that was a complete and utter lie. That she would have been able to say it with a straight face was doubtful.

"It was about me helping to free the out-wallers. It's always been about that. I wanted in and even then, you used me after the tournament. I was just a surrogate for your son."

Cloud stared at her. The warehouse burned to the right of her and it was so big that she could feel the heat off of it. Moonlit waited for his judgment and what he was going to do to her.

“You know damn well that you mean more to me than that,” Cloud protested.

“Well, it doesn't matter now, does it? I know what's going to come next.”

He wondered. “How can you be so sure?”

“I can be sure because this is the way it has been since I was born. It has never been any other way. It could have been different; you could have changed it.”

Cloud sighed like he was exhausted. “How did you find out?”

“My father of all people. He wants to have you strung up in front of everyone. He wants out-wallers to see as well, to know that you were defeated. You’ve been planning this for a long time. We know that there are more helping you.”

Moonlit didn’t deny it. Instead, she just nodded her head in agreement. She knew what was going to happen next and there was nothing to be done about it, so all she could do was accept her fate. Moonlit had learned one thing, she couldn't fight fate.

“Where are your guards? Are you going to arrest me now?”

Cloud disagreed. “How can I get the mother of my child arrested to be murdered? You are a traitor to your people and your king, to me, but I don't know what to do with you. I can't kill you, I can't banish you, so what the hell am I supposed to do with you?”

Moonlit shrugged, saying that she didn't know and that she didn't care. Obviously she did, but she did not want Cloud to know that. He already had her every way she turned around. Nothing she said would matter.

“You could just let me go,” Moonlit suggested, though she knew that it was a long shot.

“Where are you going to go? Are you just going to run off and leave the people behind that you apparently care so much about, more than your own family?”

He said it with spite and anger, his face showing the same expression.

But like the way he saw that, she certainly didn't like the way he was looking at her. The betrayal that she knew she would see if he ever found out was written all over his face, and it was far worse than anything that she had imagined, which was saying something because she had played it out hundreds of times and was worse than the last.

“I just want to be free,” Moonlit said quietly.

“That warehouse doesn’t look like you want to be free. It looks like you wanted to cause death and destruction. I never saw that in you, but I guess there's a lot we don't know about each other,” Cloud concluded.

They started to walk back to the castle and then to the rooms that they shared. Moonlit wasn't sure what was going on. She asked him as much and he left her moments afterward. “Don't leave the rooms, don’t ask me what will happen either, Moonlit. Just don't do it. For once, listen to your king.”

Moonlit sat on the couch and tried not to show how upset she was. She had been caught, the man she loved was hurt and betrayed, and it was all her fault. It didn't feel like anything was ever going to go right again.

# Chapter 20

Cloud

“I told you I wasn't lying, son,” Battle Star said with a smirk. His father was enjoying being right far too much for Cloud’s liking. It was the first thing that his father said to him when he walked in the room, and Cloud pulled him aside and asked him what he was doing there.

Battle Star scoffed. “That's a hell of a question to ask the person who just saved your kingdom.”

Cloud clicked his tongue. “You didn't save anything for me. This is all about you and your legacy. It never has been about me. You didn't want to step down and you certainly didn't want to give the title to me, but I got it anyway.”

His father had come to him gloating as soon as he had gotten back. He’d searched for the Book of Kings, needing to prove to his people that letting the out-wallers in was the right choice. What Moonlit was doing and what she had planned to do would undermine everything. Cloud would never be able to convince his people that it was a time for everyone to come together, not when they realized that they had so narrowly diverted being blown up. Moonlit had enough arsenal in that warehouse to take out everyone in the whole city.

When he first learned about it, his natural reaction had been that it was a lie. His father had made his feelings known about Moonlit from the beginning. He didn't even want her to be in the tournament to begin with. It had been a mistake, his father had chided. Everything that he did was a mistake in his father's eyes.

“Why are you acting like this is my doing? You are the one who let an out-waller in, and you almost lost the kingdom for it.”

“Then you are really going to hate what I am about to do and what I'm about to tell you, father. There is going to be a new mate and she is the mother of my child. Mia died months before Dennis was born. Moonlit was my surrogate. So, whether you like it or not, out-wallers are going to be the next king and if you want to save your kingdom, you better not say a word about it. Your legacy will be gone.”

Cloud could have punched his father in the face and would have gotten less of a reaction. He backed up several steps like he had been physically assaulted. His father looked like he was going to have a heart attack, so Cloud kept talking, telling him about the seer and what was said. Then, he was talking about the Book of Kings and how they were reincarnated. Saying it out loud, Cloud was well aware of how crazy it sounded.

“I have heard this before; we've all heard it many times in our childhood. Why are you bringing it to me now? What does that tale have to do with you and Moonlit?”

Cloud threw him the book, not saying another word. His father looked at it, flipped through it slowly and still neither man said anything. It wasn’t until he got to the illustration part, the one that showed the legendary couple, that he stopped and stared at the picture. Cloud knew exactly what he was thinking, he knew what picture he was looking at, because he himself had looked at it for what seemed like hours.

Malachi had always been right, but sometimes some of the things he said were so outside of the realm of possibility for Cloud that he didn't believe it. It wasn't the first time that he had fact checked the old, withered man, and it wasn’t the first time that he had been right. Cloud wanted so desperately for him to be right about the rest of it. The ceremony was tomorrow, and everything hinged on Moonlit

being chosen as his new mate. All he had to do was keep things together long enough for that to happen.

It sounded so easy not too long ago when he first found out. But now, it wasn't near as easy as he had thought. Cloud was barely talking to Moonlit, he was about to be paired up again, and his father was foaming at the mouth to ruin it all.

“I don't understand,” his dad said with a confused expression.

“That's where I've been, I needed to find this book. There's going to be some changes. What I found at that warehouse is gone now, but it doesn't change anything. Nothing is to be said about this. Nothing. I don't want anyone to know about it,” Cloud said.

Battle Star did not understand. He had a look of abject horror and confusion on his face, and Cloud didn't care either way if he approved or if he understood. He had spent way too much of his life listening to his father and letting him direct how he ruled. Cloud was done with that.

He knew the only way that the clan was ever going to go in the direction that he knew it must, Cloud was going to have to break away from the advisors he’d used his whole life. Not only that, but he was also going to directly go against their wishes. A few months ago, that would have been blasphemy, but Cloud was starting to realize what he would lose if he followed in their footsteps. It was time for him to forge a new path. It was the only way that he would be able to take them all where they needed to be.

“How can you still have her in your house, with your son? How can you trust that devil of a woman after everything she's done?” his father asked incredulously.

“What really has she done, father?”

“What do you mean?!” His father was getting red faced, the anger seething out of him. Cloud knew that look well and he tried to

suppress the grin. It wasn't going to help, even though he found the moment quite hilarious.

“I mean, she spent her own money and bought weapons and amassed them in a warehouse. We don't actually know what she was going to do with them, so it would be wrong of us to make assumptions,” Cloud concluded.

Battle Star wasn’t playing. He was ready to come unglued. “What about the guy that you caught there? Did your investigators not get any information out of him? Give me a crack at him and I’m sure I will be able to.”

Cloud’s teeth were clenched together. It was something that Cloud was trying to rapidly forget, and he certainly didn't need anybody reminding him of it.

“I don’t think that is something that you should worry yourself about. I am the one in charge now. You don't need to worry yourself with rumors and conjectures. I am telling you now, nobody has to know about this because nothing happened. What she bought with her money was her choice and since nothing was done with it, there is no reason to worry about it.”

His father just shook his head in disgust. “I never would have thought that you would let a piece of tail get between you and your own clan. You are the Alpha. You are supposed to be directing them into a bigger and better world. You stopped taking land, you stopped fighting, what kind of Alpha are you?” his father asked with a sneer.

Cloud knew that his father's words were supposed to hurt him, but they didn't. In reality, they just pissed him off. He was questioning his decisions and while it was understandable, Cloud could not allow it to happen. Nobody could question him, not even his father, and Battle Star knew that. He knew what he was doing and the harm of his reputation and the trust in him that he was corrupting. It was that very knowledge that put Cloud off the most.

“I am a better Alpha than you ever were. Our people already know it and after tomorrow, they will understand it even better. Your way of ruling is over. There will be no more needless killing and taking of land. We have people now that need our help and yet we do nothing. Things are going to change, dad, and you can either go with it or get the hell out of my way.”

There was a wild look in his father's eyes, and it was the first time that Cloud thought that he might actually try to take him on. The Alpha title could be taken by anyone, at any time. It made the Alpha stay strong and on his toes. As soon as another could challenge and take him down, he would lose it. Cloud wasn’t going to lose his title to his father, even if he thought that he could get it. Cloud wouldn’t allow it to happen.

“You're making a mistake.”

That was the last thing he said to Cloud as he walked out. Cloud didn’t try to stop him, but he did think of locking him away until after it was over, so that his father didn’t ruin everything. The idea of it happening was high, but he pushed it aside. He was still his father, and whether he made shit decisions and let his pride rule everything or not, Cloud couldn't do that to his own father. There were some lines that he couldn't cross for anybody, not even Moonlit.

# Chapter 21

Moonlit

She waited nervously in the bedchambers for Cloud to get back. Moonlit had thought to lie in the bed naked, waiting for him and hoping to sidetrack him enough that she would be able to convince him not to hate her. Everything had blown up in her face, and Moonlit didn't know what to do about it. She tried her hardest to focus on anything else, but nothing else came to mind. It was all she could think of, Cloud and the future of all the people on the outside of the wall who were sitting ducks for any raid party that came by.

While she knew why she did it, Moonlit did not believe that Cloud would understand. How could he? She tried to explain things, make him see reason before, but it was a hard subject between the two of them. Moonlit didn't want to push it, so instead she had done something about it. That something was going to get her killed. There was no other way for it to end. Moonlit couldn't believe that she was still alive right then.

When Cloud got back, Moonlit could barely look at him. She knew what he thought of her, and it hurt her inside desperately because Moonlit loved him. Moonlit knew what he had in his labs, she's been there many times before, but it had given her a leg up, because she had learned everything about her enemy. It was hard to look at Cloud in that way. Moonlit didn't want to. He had never felt like her enemy before, not in a long time.

“We need to talk,” Cloud began.

Moonlit felt her nerves going into overdrive and she asked him what there was to talk about.

“Do you think there is nothing between us?”

She wasn’t going to say that, but she didn't know how to talk about it in other terms. There was no coming back from what she’d done.

“I think that whatever was between us is gone now.”

“I disagree wholeheartedly. I need to show you something and hopefully it will change your mind. I don't know if I even needed my mind changed, but if I had this book, it would have taken care of it.”

Moonlit scoffed. “You want me to read a book right now?”

“No, I want you to skim it and tell me what you think.”

He handed her a very old book that had to be hundreds of years old. She had never seen anything quite like it before and even though Moonlit was full of nerves, she was intrigued as well. Why would this book help anything between them?

“I must have seen this somewhere before, maybe in a history book. It feels familiar,” Moonlit said, staring at the cover.

“There's a lot more that's going to feel familiar. I'm really going to get something to drink. Take your time.”

There was a moment as he was leaving the room that Moonlit wondered if it was time for her to just run. Cloud was still going to give her the benefit of the doubt for a little bit longer and Moonlit could use it to get the hell away. He would have to do something as punishment for what she had done. Moonlit knew that it wouldn't be forgotten, but the bigger part of her made her stay.

Instead of running, she sat there and read a story that told of a love between a man and a woman. It was kind of a classic tale. The man and woman had a forbidden love because she was the daughter of his enemy. They didn’t care, they fell in love, and the rest

of it wrote itself. They started a war between the two clans, other clans getting involved, until it was one side against the other, with most of the shifters in America dragged into it. All because of two people and their forbidden love.

In the story, when it was all said and done, half of the shifter population was dead, and there never really was a winner or a loser, not in the traditional way. The out-wallers ended the losers. The winner were the Royals who lived inside the gates. The problem was that the woman was killed during battle and even though her lover had won the war, he had lost her and turned to bitterness, creating laws against all of her kind because he blamed them for not only the death of his people but also for the death of the only woman he'd ever loved.

The man in the story became obsessed with growing in size, just to take all of the power from the people that he conquered. His blood lust was known all across the land, until one day he was killed in his sleep, many think by his own father. His father took up the same tactics, pillaging the land and enslaving all he conquered.

The story felt so familiar that when she got to the page of the portrait of the couple, Moonlit almost dropped the book. She couldn’t believe what she was seeing in such an old book.

“I know, right?” Cloud commented, like he was reading her mind.

Cloud stood over her and they were both looking at the same piece of paper. “Is that?” Moonlit started, not able to put it into words.

Cloud nodded. “I think so. A seer told me that we are the people in the story, reincarnated once again. He seems to think that the ceremony is going to go our way. I'm not going to say that he is always right, but he’s almost never wrong. I don’t think he is wrong this time. I think that our love is one for the storybooks. It's real and it's meant to be forever. We’ve gotten a second chance and there is no way that I am going to waste it.”

“And everything is what, water under the bridge?” Moonlit asked.

“One day when all this is over, we will have a real discussion about it, but for now, it needs to be pushed to the back burner. We need to be in this together, and I wanted you to know that there's nothing to worry about tomorrow. You are the woman I've waited to be with in this life and the next. Every lifetime that I get with you, it will always be you.”

She sighed, needing to hear that he still loved her and that they were still together. Moonlit hated that she was so quick to give it all up. Giving Cloud up was the worst thing that she could do. They would do it all together.

“So, what are we going to do?”

“We are going to go to the ceremony tomorrow. It's going to be a little bit different than usual. It's going to be a hard day for a lot of people in the clan. It's time though, it's time that we all made the change. Forgive me that I didn’t do it sooner,” Cloud said.

“And then, what?”

“Then we get mated and you give me more damn babies that will keep you out of trouble.”

Moonlit thought he was just teasing, letting him kiss her, but he pulled back when she asked about his father before Cloud could get too far into it. He groaned and told her not to worry about it.

“How can I not worry about it? He knows,” Moonlit reminded Cloud.

“He won't say anything. Trust me, everything is going to work out.”

Moonlit did not have a problem believing Cloud, she had a problem believing that they were going to get a happy ending.

Sometimes fate was cruel and paired people together who were actually never supposed to be together. Why did Moonlit feel like that was their love? It felt like their love was meant to be repeated over and over again. To what end?

# Chapter 22

Cloud

It felt like something was off all day, but Cloud just pushed it down and told himself that it was just because of the situation he found himself in. It wasn't a comfortable one and surely it was just getting into his head, with everything going on and how it was all going to go to hell.

The ceremony was going to be moved, and he didn’t make an announcement until about twenty minutes before it commenced. It was going to be a shock and a surprise to pretty much everyone in and out of the gates. They're not going to be happy, and Cloud had looked to his father several times to see how he was reacting to it. The sour face and glum demeanor didn’t seem too far off. Cloud felt off, but it was already a complete nightmare.

When Cloud announced that they were going to do the ceremony at the gates, there was a grumbling in the crowd. Everybody was in their finery and the last thing that they wanted to do was go associate with the out-wallers. The discontent between the two had gotten worse. The more that Cloud tried to put them together, the worse it got.

After that night, there was going to be a mixture that was not going to be able to scrub off so easily. As much as people would want to fight it, there would be no way. Cloud knew that he was forcing it. He was going to make what he wanted to happen, happen.

A lot of people weren't going to be happy about it. A lot of people weren't happy about the idea of even doing their sacred ceremony so close to out-wallers. He could only imagine what was going to happen when pairs started coming from both sides of the wall.

The ceremony was brought to the gates, and they were left wide open. Cloud sent out callers to the other side, trying to draw in as many out-wallers as he could. There was a reason. He needed everybody to not only see what happened next, but to witness the change that was about to come. It was going to take time, but not the amount of time that they wanted. He didn't have decades to figure it out. Cloud was only guaranteed now.

While it was customary for higher matches to be done at the very end, Cloud wanted the first match to set the tone. He wanted to set the tone, or he just couldn’t wait to find out what was going to happen any longer. It was eating him up inside. If Moonlit was somehow not going to be his, Cloud had to figure out how he was going to handle it. It would not be as easy to handle as it might be thought.

Cloud made the announcement and even the elders seemed a bit taken aback by the change. He had purposely left them in the dark about it all. Too many of them were far too cozy with his father, and they were like-minded when it came to keeping the clan separate. Cloud wanted to get back to a time when it was all one clan, and he could not give the opposition warning to make their fight against him any easier.

The elders convened with the dead, looking for the woman who was supposed to be his wife and the new queen of the Royal clan. It was a pretty big deal, something that was always done last, but everybody was holding their breath just the same. Cloud felt like he was going to pass out from his impatience of it all. Too much was on the line. He needed to hear the name before he could breathe. It couldn’t be anyone but Moonlit. She was his.

Then, Moonlit’s name was read, and Cloud said a prayer upward, while a hush went over the crowd. She hadn't even stepped up yet, and nobody should even know the significance of the moment, but it was like they did. There was silence for so long, a pin drop could have been heard, before it erupted into cheers and arguments and fighting and scowling and yelling. Seeing that both sides had a

reaction, Cloud pulled Moonlit to him, not sure if he was going to have to protect her.

Cloud waited for some time before he bellowed out loudly, roaring at the end to get everybody to shut up. He had something to say. Cloud knew that it was going to be a stretch for many, but changes were coming.

“This is not going to be the only mixed match today. We are all one clan; we have always been one clan. The faster that everybody gets used to the idea of it, the smoother the transition will be. Nothing is going to change what happens next.” Cloud made sure he spoke loud enough so that everyone could hear him. He wasn’t going to repeat himself.

Cloud was yelling at the top of his voice by the end of it, trying to make sure that everybody heard him, but when he had started back in, nobody had said a word anyway, so his voice rang out clear. The silence also helped his father's voice ring clear, that and half of Cloud's own army that was behind him.

“I cannot let you do this, son! You cannot destroy everything that I have worked so hard to build. I won't let you do it! Your men are behind me. They do not want it to happen either. We will not be forced to live with dogs!”

Cloud looked to Moonlit and gave her a short kiss. “You should leave. It is going to get interesting.”

Moonlit shook her head in disagreement. “I'm not going anywhere. If you need fighters, the out-wallers will fight for you.”

Cloud was not as surprised as he would have liked to have been by that news. Moonlit had not only amassed a cache of weapons, but she had an army. He didn't ask how many, it would have to be enough. The fact of the matter was that he did not want any more of his people to die on either side of the wall. There had been enough of that, there had been centuries of that. The only way the shifters

were ever going to get back their numbers was to stop killing each other.

“All of those people behind you, father, will fight for us. This is not a day to have a bloodbath. This is the day of mating ceremonies, and you dishonor yourself and everybody here for what you are doing. Leave now if you do not agree with me, but do not die for your vanity and pride.”

His father scoffed, though fear had filled his eyes as he noticed the crowd of people that were pressing in behind him. “The out-wallers are going to fight for you?”

Cloud disagreed. “No, they're going to fight for my wife. We will be mated today, and the queen will be an out-waller, my queen. One day soon, we are going to have to take that very word out of our vocabulary. All it does is divide us. You can stand with me on the cusp of something new and wonderful, the true way to build our clan to greatness, by propping up everybody inside of it that has been wrongly persecuted. We have all the people we need here; I just need to stop treating them like they're different.”

He could see the faces on some of the soldiers that were behind his father changing. There were others that were worried about the mass of people that had started to push in toward the gate. It was a tender box that could erupt at any moment. Cloud desperately wanted to stop that from happening. He didn't want any more people to be killed or any more enemies to be made.

“I can't let you do that, son.”

“If you want my title, if you want it back, then you fight me for it. If you win, it is your decision to make. If you lose, you will shut the fuck up,” Cloud countered.

Cloud couldn't believe that he would even say such a thing to his dad, but there really was nothing else he could do. He was filled with anger that was practically suffocating. Most fights for an alpha title

were to the death. It didn't have to be, but it was considered better. There was no reason to have such an enemy right outside your door.

Battle Star pulled back from the rest of the army that was trying to go against Cloud. He spent that time trying desperately to remember every single face on the other side that had fought with his father. It wasn't going to be punitive damage, but he was definitely going to keep those people out of his inner circle where they could do damage. It would take years before he would be able to trust them again. Betrayal was not something that Cloud was able to take lightly. Fighting his father for his title was not either. He handed Moonlit his crown and gave her a short kiss. “When this is over, we will be able to move forward.”

Moonlit was full of nerves, and he told her not to worry. Cloud did not have an army like his father and Moonlit, but he didn't need it. He wasn't cocky, he just knew that his power had surpassed Battle Star’s a long time ago. It was probably the reason that Cloud got the title so young.

“This is your last chance to stand aside. I don't want to hurt you, dad.” Cloud said the last part so that just his father could hear.

His father scoffed.

“You really think that as weak as you are now, you'll be able to defeat me?” Cloud pressed in a whisper.

Battle Star hesitated. His father did not like his confidence. He had always taken it that Cloud was cocky, but it would appear that that moment was no different than all the rest.

Cloud tried to stop what was going to happen next, but his father lunged at him, and he wasn't coming at him as a human, but a large black wolf. Cloud immediately shifted, glancing off the sharp claws that came toward him and narrowly avoided the sharper teeth that went for his jugular. He did his best to not let him catch him off guard, but his father did for a moment. It was probably his resistance

to fighting him in the first place, but after a long scratch down his back from behind, Cloud knew that he had to pull his feelings out of it.

He attacked his father, their teeth gnashing and claws slicing into each other's flesh. It wasn't long before Cloud had the better of him and took him by the throat to the ground. There was a moment where he wanted to feel the crunch of his father’s neck breaking and the taste of the hot blood pumping through his body just centimeters from where his teeth were. It would be fast and painless, and the proper ending to someone so close to him.

His father relented though, showing that he gave up and putting himself at the mercy of his son. Cloud could not kill him. He couldn't kill him if nobody was watching, he certainly couldn’t kill him with his wife and the rest of the clan still watching as well. Instead, he let his father go, covered in blood and deep gashes. He shifted back into his human form and took a moment to compose himself. Moonlit gave him his jacket back.

He could have been healed, but Cloud was not done with the evening. He had a lot to say, no matter if they wanted to hear it or not.

Cloud continued with the ceremony, like nothing had happened between him and his dad. He did not want to bring any more attention to it than what was already there. It was quite clear that several people were nervous about the changes. His father was loved by many, and the army stood down, but Cloud knew that he would not be able to forget it. There was betrayal from all sides that day.

Many were matched from both sides of the gate, like destiny knew that it was finally time to make those matches now. Cloud had a sigh of relief every time another couple was matched across the gate. The more matches and more mixture, the harder it was to hate. He was sure that once people started to see each other as part of their own clan, they could realize that they were all the same and

hopefully take it and figure out a way to get along. He knew he was being optimistic, but Cloud needed to feel like it was all going to actually work out.

# Chapter 23

Moonlit

“I can't believe that you actually did it,” Moonlit repeated for the tenth time. She was still stunned by the events of the day.

Cloud tried to look offended. “Did you doubt me?”

“No, I know you, but I doubted that the clan would agree with it.”

“Not all did,” Cloud said with a scowl. “We lost a few good people, even more of a chance that they will come back and try to recruit others, start shit. Not everyone is happy about the changes.”

“The wall coming down is a big deal. You are going to make a lot of people feel safer. You're going to save a lot of people from attacks that you never heard about before. I know that my people are happy.” Moonlit reminded him that his hard work and sacrifice was not in vain.

“We have to stop saying that, my people, your people. They’re our people, Moonlit. You're the queen of them all now, no matter what side of the wall they were on a month ago.”

“It's weird to say that, even weirder to think that so many things have changed. Our people as a collective seem to be happier. You have done well; you've taken good care of them. You've taken good care of me.”

Cloud kissed Moonlit, making her feel like it really could all work out. It didn’t feel real. Since the moment that Cloud first touched her, nothing had seemed real ever since. She had never believed that she could live such a way, live in the castle, live on the inside of the

walls. Moonlit never imagined she'd have a family or be queen. It was so far from anything that she expected in her life that she woke up every morning wondering if it was real.

Cloud being there next to her helped her to remember. Their son Dennis, running up into their bed with a happy smile on his face, reminded her as well. Moonlit felt guilty sometimes because she didn't think she deserved it. She was so happy that it was unbearable. Too many times, daily, she worried that it was all a dream and when she would wake up, she'd be back on the outside of the walls, living her life, dreaming about what it would be like on the inside.

"I think I lost you," Cloud observed blandly.

Moonlit disagreed with a smile, even if it was a little sad. "You could never lose me, Cloud. I hope you know that.

"I know, because you're my husband and king."

Cloud shook his head, wanting her to understand something. He got intense. "Not just that, I wouldn't let you go, even if none of it would happen. I would have found a way for us to be together. We have no other choice. I am not complete without you."

Moonlit could see the emotions running through his eyes and she melted right where she was standing. Cloud never talked about emotions, and it was strange to see the change. Before, he was almost cold in the way that he didn't talk about his feelings. Moonlit had thought that he just didn't care, but then she'd learned that he was a deep well of emotions, always running beneath the surface.

Not only that, he had really opened up when he became a father. Moonlit hadn't dreamt of being so happy, and she never would have imagined that she would have the perfect man by her side, a king. She never imagined that she could love someone so much. Cloud and her child filled her up with the same deep emotions and she felt her eyes getting red-rimmed.

“What has you sad?”

Moonlit said that she wasn’t sad, she was just emotional. Moonlit blamed it on the day’s events, because she was still uncomfortable telling him how she really felt about him, how she feared that it was all a lie.

Instead of explaining any of that, Moonlit kissed him. She mentioned that they weren’t even mated yet.

Cloud pulled back and asked her what she meant by that. “We were mated in front of the whole clan today, you are mine. Hell, Moonlit, you’ve been mine since the first night we were together, maybe even when I saw you standing next to Oleander on the road. The way you looked at us soldiers, I don’t know how to describe it, but it did something to me.”

Moonlit wanted to hear it but talking was too much. Her voice would cut out, she was sure of it. Cloud would know that something was wrong and he would press her for answers that she didn’t have.

Her kiss became feverish, and Cloud mentioned that he understood now.

“You want to consummate it then?”

Moonlit nodded, telling him that she had been thinking about it all day, which she had. After he found the warehouse, Moonlit had worried if they ever would again. Now that they were together, he was holding her in his arms, Moonlit wanted to tighten her grip on his heart. She wanted him to only think of her and the love that they had together.

Her passionate embrace was noticed, and it wasn’t long before Cloud didn’t want to talk anymore either. They were staying in their chambers, though it had been decked out with rose petals, candles, and everything that could be thought of as sexy. It was normal for a couple to stay in their ‘cocoon’ for up to a week and Moonlit knew

that they would be one of them. She immediately felt the familiar desire that coursed through her when her husband touched her.

He was moving slow tonight, just like he had the first time that they were together, and Moonlit spent an hour trying to avoid losing her mind with his soft and steady ministrations. His lips and tongue were on all parts of her body and Cloud seemed bound and determined to make her go mad.

She pulled him up, reminding Cloud that she wasn't untouched any longer. He didn't have to wait until she was ready. Moonlit was ready right then. She was dying for him and all he had to do was give her what she really needed.

Cloud had just made her come. He was in between her legs, face damp from his attention and Moonlit on the cusp of greatness. She was writhing underneath him, trying desperately to pull him back down to finish her off.

When it wasn't going to happen, Moonlit opened her eyes and asked him what was going on. She wasn't irked, but a little. Cloud had been playing her like a fiddle and now, he paused, waiting for her to do as he said. She sighed loudly and met his gaze.

"Why did you stop? I was so close!" Moonlit fussed. She wanted him and being told no was not something that she wanted to see or hear. She was frustrated to no end when he shook his head and said that they were going to talk.

"It's our wedding night, Cloud, I don't want to talk. Are you going to tell me that Royals don't have sex after they get mated?" she asked, oblivious to how he was taking it.

"We need to talk about the warehouse and what my father found, the army that was willing to fight today."

Moonlit sighed and closed her eyes again. She didn't want to see that look of pain on his face, especially since she knew that there

was a reason that he felt that way, and it was because of her. She had hurt him and that was a hard pill to swallow.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” Moonlit said.

Cloud shook her and slapped her wet core with his open hand. It stung a little because she was wet, but more than that, it felt good to get that sort of attention, even if it wasn’t meant to make her feel good. Moonlit was so close. She reckoned if he did it just once or twice more, Moonlit would be able to get off and that was all that was on her mind at the moment.

“Don’t make me talk about it, Cloud.”

He slapped her core again and heard her call out. She wanted to moan but knew that Cloud would stop if he knew how badly she wanted him to continue. He was trying to punish her or get information. Whatever it was, it felt the same way.

“You will now, or I will walk away from you and leave you like this,” Cloud threatened, always knowing just where to hit her where it hurt. She was too needy and the idea of him walking away when she was feeling so on edge wasn’t good for Moonlit at all. She was already shaking with fear just thinking about it. Being without Cloud was torture.

“I don’t know what to say. I’m sorry.”

“Do you not love me?” Cloud wondered out loud. Moonlit told him that of course she loved him, but that wasn’t a good enough answer for Cloud. He wanted to know why things had gone so wrong and how she was so ready to fight him.

“If you loved me, you wouldn’t have amassed weapons and an army against me,” Cloud considered.

“I had to save them, Cloud. It didn’t matter how much I loved you or Dennis. I knew that you would be okay, our son would be okay.

People like Oleander were not okay. They are being attacked and abused and it isn't right. I got mad with what happened to Oleander, and I didn't know what else to do. I had all this money you kept giving me, to live here with you, so I thought I should put it to use, since I was the one living well and they weren't."

"You felt guilty for living in the castle with me and our son?" Cloud asked, clearly not able to see why she would feel that sort of way. Moonlit wanted to tell him that it wasn't all just that, but she nodded her head, because it was far closer than she thought he was able to manage thinking about.

"I do. I won't feel better until all of our clan is out of the cold and rain, danger. Then, I will be able to be happy and not worry about them anymore. Then, I will be able to focus on our family."

Cloud said that he wanted her to concentrate on their family right then.

"I think it's time to have another child. It hasn't happened yet, but I hope that it will tonight. You are a great mother and since you aren't going to attack me now, it's time that we start making our family bigger."

Moonlit had been the one that wanted to move to the next stage as it was. She was the one that had prompted it all, Cloud in between her legs. Now though, Moonlit wanted to slow things down. She wanted to finish the conversation, but Cloud wasn't interested.

He moved his body over hers, until he was face to face with her and kissed her lightly, telling her how much he loved her. Moonlit was full of love, she could feel it, but there was something else there as well, trust.

"How can you forgive me just like that? I almost went to war with you." Moonlit felt obligated to mention, her conscience not letting it go away. He didn't seem to get it all, what she had done, would have done. Moonlit blanched to even think about it.

“You need two people to fight, Moonlit, and there is no way that I would have been able to go to war with you or my own people. I would have done anything in my power to make sure that it didn’t happen. You know that, right?”

Moonlit scoffed. “You really think you could have stopped me?” While she was happy for forgiveness, naturally, she couldn’t imagine that he would have just let it go.

“No, Moonlit, I think that you would have come around and stopped yourself. Planning it and getting prepared for something is very different than carrying something like that out. I can’t believe that you would have gone through with it.”

Moonlit agreed, because even though she talked about it, had meetings, planned it, she could never actually see herself doing it, going against Cloud. Every time she had tried to keep her distance, she found it more impossible than the last time.

“I probably wouldn’t have,” Moonlit admitted. It was a short sign of defeat in her voice, but she felt it. She realized then how much she loved him, always had, and probably wouldn’t have gone through with it.

Cloud was done talking, apparently hearing what he wanted to hear, so now he wanted to do what he wanted to do. That was to make more babies and when he pushed deep the first time, Moonlit exploded on top of him. It came over her like a wave, crashing over her and knocking her off her feet. She could barely stand up to his desire and when she peaked for the second time moments later, she didn’t want to. Cloud was all she needed.

# Epilogue

Cloud

**Five years later…**

Every year the matching ceremony got bigger and bigger. Out-wallers and Royals interchanged so much that it was becoming hard to know the difference. That made Cloud happier than probably anything else in the last five years, as well as the two more sons that he had gotten in between that time. They talked of having another one, possibly a girl, but at the moment, he had three boys to look after and the eldest was now about to be seven and it was his turn to find his match.

Dennis would be given the name of the woman that would be his mate when he got older and became Alpha. The new queen's name would be spoken today for the first time and there was a lot of conjecture whether it would be a Royal or an out-waller. While it was hard to tell the difference for most, some people still hadn't forgotten.

Cloud was tense, hoping that everything turned out the way he wanted it to. They needed a good day. There had been some skirmishes on his boundaries. It wasn’t anything like before, but he still wanted one day with peace and no fighting. There had been less and less fighting since a year after the walls came down. There was fighting for many months right after the decision was made to do so. People protested, and small rebellions were fostered, but it did not get the expected results. Cloud had to kill a couple of traitors, one of them being his own cousin, because some people just couldn't deal with being the same as an out-waller that they had looked down on for centuries.

The clan was in constant adaptation and the changes were swift. Cloud found his burden as a leader was helped with his wife. Many times, she would speak for the out-wallers and help him to understand when he was pushing the boundary that he may not have even realized. Even after five years, Cloud was still amazed at some of the changes and differences between their people. He wanted them all to come back together, but at the same time, he had to respect centuries of traditions. He was in a constant state of motion, just like the clan. Cloud knew that he had a lot to learn, and Moonlit helped him.

The gathered people looked happy, or most of them. After all these years, there were still a few holdouts and Cloud thought that was perfectly natural. He didn't worry about it. He had found himself worrying less, even though in some ways his position was far more precarious. With Moonlit, Cloud found he didn’t need to worry about much of anything. She helped him to calm himself down and keep a level head.

The ceremony was still taking place by the wall, right where it had been in the beginning. It meant something to most people and Cloud saw Moonlit there. Her beauty still stopped him in his tracks, that moment was no different.

He just watched Moonlit from afar, one son in her arms and two more around her skirts. Cloud felt like he was going to burst he was so happy. It wasn't supposed to be that way. He had once thought that the Alpha title and the responsibilities of taking care of so many people were suffocating. Now he had even more people to take care of and he did it with ease. Cloud knew that it was Moonlit’s presence in his life that made it so.

He let them play for a while, the kids romping and ripping, the queen giving advice to anyone who needed it. It took a lot less time for people to warm up to her than for out-wallers to warm up to him. Moonlit had a light inside of her that everyone could see if they were around here for more than a few minutes. Cloud had seen it, bathed in the glory now for quite some time and he knew that he had to

share it once in a while, even if he wanted to be stingy and keep her hidden at the cabin all to himself like before. That would be the only way that he would get Moonlit to himself then.

Finally, Cloud called everyone to attention and the ceremony began. He wondered what changed fate, if he and Moonlit had actually changed it or if it was just a natural occurrence of things. Either way, Cloud knew that every connection just made his clan stronger. All of his people were coming together and soon there would be no difference between one and the other. Each baby that was born, each marriage, prompted closer ties.

When it was time for his son to go up, there was a hush because it mattered which way it went. Cloud honestly didn't care one way or another, just that destiny and fate would be as kind to his sons as they had been to him. So, they would all have to put their destiny in the hands of the ancestors. He liked to believe that whatever the answer would be, it would be right.

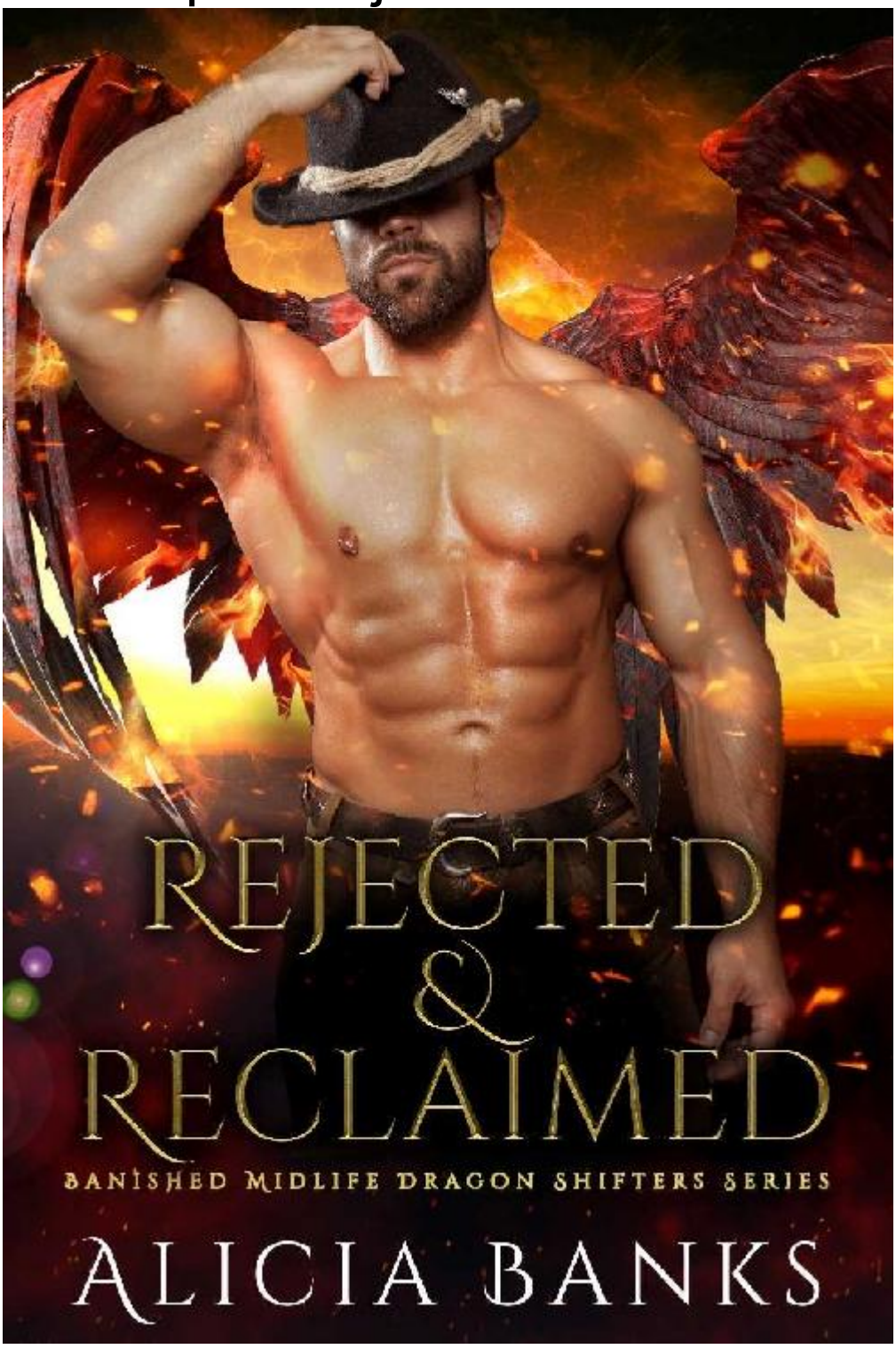
The voice and name rang out to the crowd. Cloud looked around for movement, waiting to see who his son was destined to be with. A little girl a few years younger walked up smiling with her parents. They were out-wallers and she just kept repeating that she would be queen one day, just like Moonlit. It warmed his heart that his wife gave them hope and someone to look up to.

The rest of the festivities went off without a hitch, a lot of people talking about everything going on. There was excitement about the new queen, and then Moonlit stood up and made her own announcement. Apparently, they were about to have their fourth child and the celebration took an even sweeter turn. Cloud hoped that this time, Moonlit would get the daughter that she yearned for.

Cloud’s heart was full. He looked around at the people gathered and knew that things were exactly how they were supposed to be. Cloud hadn’t known that life could be so beautiful until Moonlit came in and changed everything.

The End

# Sample: Rejected & Reclaimed



# Chapter One: The Escape

***Valerie Blanchette Kenway***

Valerie glanced at her FitBit as she shoved more of Londyn's clothes into the little pink suitcase. "Come on, honey, help me out here. Grab your shoes out of the closet."

"We have to be gone before Daddy gets home, don't we?"

The fact that her six-year-old daughter understood so much of what was going on broke Valerie's heart. A child shouldn't have to understand adult situations. But then again, this situation was unfair on several different levels.

She didn't want to scare her little girl, but Valerie also didn't want to lie. "We do. You know that Daddy has been upset, and we just need to go away until he's had some time to think about everything."

Londyn laid her hand on her mother's shoulder. "Mommy, it's okay to be scared. Daddy scares me, too. I'm happy that we're leaving, but he has--"

"Get your shoes." Valerie didn't want to hear the words that were about to be spoken. Much to her relief, Londyn didn't persist and ran to her closet. She returned a minute later carrying several pairs of tennis shoes.

"I didn't get my fancy shoes. We can get those later."

Valerie tossed the shoes in the suitcase. She wasn't sure if there would be a later, but shoes could be replaced.

Her cell phone vibrated on the dresser. With her heart in her throat, Valerie peeked at the display. Randall. The very man they were talking about, it was as if his radar had gone off that something was amiss. As she reached for the phone, she prayed that he didn't know what that was yet. Her life may very well depend on it.

"Hi, sweetheart." She tried to sound calm and collected even as she motioned for Londyn to freeze and not make a peep. If her father realized that she wasn't in school, he would immediately come home to figure out why.

"Hello, my love." She hated it when he called her that. "I was just calling to confirm our dinner date tonight. I expect you to be ready on time."

She remembered the date. It was the exact reason that she had to leave now. "I'm excited for it. I'm heading out in a few so I can get my nails done before I pick Londyn up from school." She made a clicky sound with her lips. "If I have time, I may swing in and have Yvonne style my hair, so I don't have to waste time doing it. I already have my clothes laid out." She had been going to the same salon for years, and Randall had personally chosen Yvonne as the go-to stylist.

"Very good. I'll leave you to it. Have fun, but don't get any bright colors on your nails. I believe the Hollingsworth's are more demure people."

"Good to know. I'll make you proud." She tried not to gag.

"You always do. But Todd and Mary Hollingsworth are important clients. We need to be the most impressive power couple that we can be. I'll see you tonight."

*More like impress them because you're sucking up*. She was already well aware who they were, but Randall had no idea about that. Valerie muttered a goodbye, one that she hoped was for forever.

He ended the call, and she made sure that the call had actually disconnected before she let out her breath. "Thank you for being quiet, baby girl."

Londyn patted her arm. "I know, Mommy. I may only be six, but I'm old enough to understand running away."

Valerie snorted. "Of course you are." She took a final look around. "I think we're about done here." She had no intentions of primping in the least, but she figured that if Randall thought she was, it would buy her a few extra, desperately needed, hours before he found her missing. Just in case, she laid a dress that she wasn't intending to take across the bed with a pair of heels on the floor. If he came in, he would hopefully just think she was later getting back from the salon.

Even though she's been super careful about her activities, and he has no reason to suspect, fear dogs her as she hurries Londyn to finish packing whatever she wants to take with her. The little girl has a separate bag for her artwork and materials, and Valerie holds it open so Londyn can stuff the remaining items inside.

They rolled their luggage to the front door, and Londyn struggled to pull her shoes on. Valerie resisted helping, knowing that it would just slow things down as her daughter argued with her about not being a baby. She shifted her weight from foot to foot as she waited and watched the minutes tick by on the hallway clock.

It was only a matter of time before Randall figured out that she had swindled large amounts of his money from his various accounts in order to build a nest egg. Earlier that morning, she had been questioned by the president of one of the banks who happened to be Mr. Todd Hollingsworth. Valerie knew that it would be a quick discovery if she were to attend the dinner party. She half cussed herself for being reckless and taking too many chances instead of stopping before she raised suspicion. But she had watched enough Lifetime movies to know that if she didn't cover everything now, she wasn't going to have the option later. Raising the alarm made her

hope that she had enough tucked away, but at this point, it didn't matter. She had to leave before Randall saw his friend again.

It moved her plans up a couple days. The process server with her divorce papers was scheduled to serve Randall in two days. Valerie had planned to leave that day, but this dinner date gone wrong had made her scramble to get out of dodge early.

Once all the suitcases were stowed away in her car, Valerie pulled the file from the secret space under her desk drawer. She hadn't wanted to pull it out until they were walking out the door just in case Randall had come home. Outside Adventures. The one place in the world that she never thought she'd find herself running to. Just outside her hometown of Manitou Springs, Colorado, she hadn't visited the large ranch since she had left town and never looked back. While Randall knew about the area, he didn't know about her connection to the ranch.

Or why she had a connection to the ranch. At least as far as she knew. He had helped her sell her parents home after they both passed away, but he had never actually been there.

Valerie had made the reservations on bated breath, knowing that her name was probably the last one they would ever expect to see on their online reservation system, one in which she used her maiden name. She had no idea how she would be received, so she wanted to give them as little information about herself as possible, such as her married name.

The plane tickets were also in the folder; tickets that had almost been more bullshit than their worth. With Randall keeping her on such a tight budget and a short leash, Valerie had been resigned to purchasing a prepaid credit card.  But with all the restrictions and regulations now, the tickets had to be purchased either in person or with a good standing, traditional credit card. She had asked one of her closer friends from the many committees that she was involved with, one who knew most of the situation with Randall but wasn't particularly fond of him, to buy the tickets and then gave her cash. It

had been a project, but it was done. And luckily, the airlines hadn’t given her any grief when she called to change the date.

While she wouldn't have usually put so much trust in someone, desperate times called for desperate measures, and the time had come for a desperate flee across the country.

# Chapter Two: Dreams of the Past

***Tyson “Ty” Hale***

Tyson was exhausted when he went to bed. His day had been filled with trail rides and city tourists who had never been in the great outdoors before, not the way they made it in Colorado. He loved watching their enthusiasm when they saw the wildlife or caught a glimpse of an eagle, but babysitting them so they didn't get hurt was always over the top. He was asleep before his head hit the pillow, and the dream started almost immediately.

*The sun was shining brightly, its golden rays feeding the luxurious flora that graced the veil of waters cascading from the falls above the cave entrance. The cobblestone walk that meandered through the hidden valley allowed the heavy clomps of the soldiers' feet to alert Vinia that they had visitors. She twisted her hands together. Something was wrong, terribly wrong. Her beloved Jeremiah had left early this morning for what she had assumed was to stretch his wings, but he had never returned, and the supper hour was drawing near. She had gathered her five children on the sofa. The interior of the cave was modern, hotel suite like in design and had been a comfortable home. The dripping of the water that flowed through the core of the rocks matched the clang of the footsteps. It was getting closer, and fear settled into the depths of her stomach. Vinia's anxiety and fear had reached its peak when the banging startled her back to the moment.*

*She answered the door to find not one, but several soldiers.*

*"Can I help you?" She fought to keep the trembling out of her voice, to no avail.*

*"We are under orders of the Alpha Dragon King to search your cave dwelling. Step aside."*

*They didn't give her the chance to move before pushing their way in. She stumbled backward then caught her balance.*

*"What is this about?" She asked.*

*The soldiers ignored her question. The one who had spoken grabbed her arm and roughly pulled her toward the sofa where her children sat. Fear was prevalent on each of their young faces. Little Sarah, who surely had no concept of what was going on, teared up as she was grasped tightly in Colton's arms. He had a protective streak a mile wide, and Vinia prayed he didn't jump to his feet and make demands of the soldiers.*

*"Do not interfere." The soldier ordered and pressed her down until the arm of the sofa bumped into the back of her legs.*

*Vinia had no choice but to obey. She sat perched on the arm of the sofa, one arm wrapped around Drake, her youngest son. She could hear her dishes and glassware shattering in the kitchen, drawers being upended in the bedrooms. A loud crash from the game room made her jump. They were destroying everything. Everything they had worked for, everything that belonged to her children, and she still did not know why.*

*When the soldiers came back to the living room, they searched every corner, upending furniture and end table drawers. One grabbed the area rug and with a quick flick of his powerful hand lifted it from the ground, knocking the coffee table to the side as if it were an annoying fruit fly. Her children were crying in earnest now, except for Colton. She could feel his anger rising next to her and she stared at him until he made eye contact. With a quick shake of her head from side to side, she conveyed to him that he needed to stay his tongue. His eyes narrowed, fury showing with red splotches on his face, but he nodded. He understood. He didn't like it, but he understood.*

*When the soldiers finished, they stood casually amongst the ramshackle disaster they had created in her living room, in her home. The soldier in charge cleared his throat, avoiding looking at her children.*

*"Your mate, Jeremiah, was caught at the temple of Brigid. He was charged with theft of the sacred cross. During his detainment a fight ensued, and he did not survive."*

*She jumped from her perch; her fists clenched so tight her nails were digging into the palms of her hands. She could feel her dragon rising as her emotions spiralled. Anger, fear, and denial consumed her all at once.*

*"He did not! He would never. You killed him. You killed Jeremiah." She screamed, her voice breaking on the last sentence. She was vaguely aware of the cries of her children. Colton was yelling and snivelling. He shoved Sarah in Tyson's arms and jumped to his feet. Vinia barely grabbed ahold of his arm before he launched an attack on the soldier.*

*"I'm sorry, he did. And we did, as is our duty. You have been ordered out of the Sacred Garden by the Alpha Dragon King. You are never to return. You will be given five minutes to gather what you and the children need then we will escort you to the gates to the world. The clock is ticking."*

*How, Vinia thought, how can they destroy their belongings, deliver the news of her mate's murder, and that's what it was. Murder. Vinia had no doubt of Jeremiah's innocence, as there was not a more honorable dragon shifter in all the Sacred Garden, and then to expect her to gather her children and what they needed from the mess they had made. Brigid, she silently prayed, you know he is innocent, help me, help us.*

*Colton chose that moment to jump up and kick the soldier in his shins. The soldier placed his hand in the center of Colton's forehead and gave him a shove. Not enough to hurt him, but to*

*knock him back. Vinia grabbed Colton by the arm again and pulled him to her side. She needed to get the children away from here, away from them. She didn't have faith that they wouldn't harm her or the children.*

*"Colton. Colt, honey, look at me." Vinia forced him to look at her. "I need you to stay here, right here on the couch and watch your brothers and sister while I gather what we need."*

*"We're not leaving." He said fiercely, but his bottom lip was trembling in tandem with mine.*

*"We have to, baby. We must leave now."*

*"I'm not a baby."*

*Vinia looked at her boy. So much of Jeremiah showed in him. Not just his looks, but his protectiveness of his family, in his demeanor. It nearly hurt to look at him, knowing that she would never see Jeremiah again. At least she has them though, all their children, created from the love of two mates who were completely devoted to one another.*

*"You're right, you are not a baby. So please do this for me."*

*Vinia scrambled through the cave gathering a change of clothes and boxed juices and snacks for each child. She shoved pull ups in a sack for Sarah along with her juice and toddler cookies. She looked at the three backpacks she had sitting by the door. She would have to carry hers and Sarah, as well as Sarah, but the boys could carry their own. She grabbed a favorite toy for each of them then hurriedly placed her clothes and a stash of money they kept in a safe that the soldiers had cracked open but left untouched. In the center of the floor was a photo of her and Jeremiah at their mating ceremony. The glass was shattered, and the frame was bent. Vinia stepped over the mess and knelt, carefully removing the photo. A sob caught in her throat and all she wanted to do was break down and scream curses for allowing this to happen. But she could not.*

*She had five children, and she was all they had now. She placed the photo in the bottom of the backpack then carried them one by one to the children, placing it on their back.*

*"Time's up." The soldier said.*

*Vinia placed her backpack on, slung Sarah's over her shoulder and reached for her.*

*"All of you hold hands now and stay with me." Vinia ordered her children as gently as she could. She tried to keep the fear out of her voice, but knew she failed. She watched them follow her instructions, then turned to follow the soldiers out of their home. At the door, she stopped and turned, taking one last look at the place she thought she would live out her centuries, with her mate lovingly beside her. She took a deep breath and reminded herself that her children needed her then turned and followed the soldiers out onto the cobblestone paths and into the bright sunlight. The cheerful reds, purples and yellows of the flowers and the swooshing of the falls did not bring her happiness, for the first time. The Sacred Gardens was no longer their home.*

Tyson woke with a start. A quick assessment around the room reassured him that he was alone and that it had all just been a dream. He sat up on the couch and held his head in his hands. It was gloomy outside, in that moment between daylight and nighttime.

He was soaked in a cold sweat. He hated dreams like the one he'd just had. While the details changed from dream to dream, the outcome remained the same. His father had been murdered, the item he had been accused of stealing had never been found, and he and his family had been banished from the Sacred Gardens.

As always, he renewed his vow to find the artifact that somehow his father had stolen, walked outside the building and was murdered, but hadn't had the idol on his body. The simple fact that it made no sense was not lost on Tyson, but it had been lost on those in charge. Someday he'd find it and clear his father's name.

Logan, his younger brother, walked out from the kitchen. That's what had woken him up. Tyson growled at him for the intrusion. Logan just laughed at him.

"Bud, the horses won't feed themselves just because you're sleeping in. Maybe you shouldn't stay up so late at night."

"Or maybe I should let you take all of the city slickers so I don't have to," Tyson retorted.

"Hell no. I don't have the patience for that."

Tyson laughed as he headed to the barn. The horses never did appreciate a good sleep, and he also knew that he and his brothers split up the more challenging guests. They had a really good working relationship for being brothers, even though they had their fights.

He finished the feeding and was heading back to his cabin when his mother called to him. Vinia was standing at the main lodge, and as he approached, she had a strange expression on her face.

"What's up?"

"You need to come here for a minute." She gestured for him to go inside. "Take a look at the reservations."

His heart sank. "Tell me we're not getting an entire tour group from New York City."

"Not exactly."

He walked behind the desk and perused the reservations. And then he saw it. "You have got to be kidding me."

Valerie Blanchette. A name that he never thought he would ever see again.

He glanced at his mother before he turned and stomped out without saying a word.

***

END OF THE SAMPLE!

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Love,

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